

THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ON STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS  
AMONG LOW-INCOME, BILINGUAL HISPANIC CHILDREN

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## ABSTRACT

Research shows that positive student-teacher attachment relationships contribute to positive student outcomes including higher academic achievement, better school adjustment, and greater social-emotional functioning. Additionally, these relationships serve as protective factors for disadvantaged children exposed to various life stressors. For young English language learners, language skills and the ability to communicate with teachers influences the development of these relationships, especially in predominately English speaking classrooms. Given the differences in language skills of these children, it is important to understand how language proficiency affects the development of student-teacher relationships. This study examined 313 Hispanic preschool children ages 3 to 5 years old, from low-income families of an urban school district in the Northeast. Findings from hierarchical regression analyses suggest that language proficiency has a significant impact on student-teacher relationships. Teachers tended to rate their relationships as closer with students demonstrating greater English or Spanish proficiency skills than students with low language skills in either language. Additionally, teachers tended to rate their relationships with females as closer and reported experiencing fewer conflicts than with male students. The implications of this study are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

Hispanic individuals comprised approximately 15% of the United States population in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This statistic is larger than any other minority group and is expected to increase more rapidly than other groups, reaching approximately 24% within the next 40 years. Additionally, in 2009, 14.3% of the nation was living at or below the poverty line; Hispanics accounted for 25.3% of this statistic making this group the second largest racial group, by a small margin, living at or below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Despite the increasing size of the Hispanic population in the United States, there remains a lack of research on young Hispanic children living in impoverished conditions. The long lasting effects of poverty expose children to a variety of risk factors which can have detrimental effects on their development. Not only does poverty contribute to intrafamilial stress, it has the potential to create stressful living environments for children by negatively impacting relationships with parents, siblings, and many developmental outcomes later in life. Consequently, children exposed to multiple risk factors during early childhood are more likely to demonstrate academic and social-emotional problems, fewer prosocial skills, and more problem behaviors in later childhood (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, Hennon, & Hooper, 2006). Living in impoverished conditions may exacerbate such risk factors and contribute to maladaptive outcomes. However, research suggests that positive relationships may serve as an important protective factor that can alleviate or buffer the negative effects of such risk factors. In particular, children living in lower-income homes may have better academic outcomes when experiencing higher quality care early in life as compared to those without this protective factor (Dearing,

McCartney, & Taylor, 2009). Thus, it is important to understand the nature of early relationships in order to best foster positive outcomes for disadvantaged Hispanic children.

Attachment theory highlights the imperative role of a child's early relationships and particularly the long lasting effects they may have. This theory postulates that early relationships are fundamental underpinnings of subsequent relationships and are significantly related to developmental outcomes (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, as stated by DeMulder et al., 2000). The quality of early relationships provides children with a working framework for interpreting and understanding the world (Sroufe, 1988). Furthermore, attachment relationships in childhood are directly linked to mental health outcomes later in life (Bowlby, 1988). It is important to investigate the features that contribute to protective factors for children in order to facilitate positive outcomes for children. In the lives of children, relationships may serve this purpose in copious ways which is why further research in this area is critical.

Research also suggests that early relationships to caregivers translate to the development of relationships with teachers once children enter school. Positive, secure relationships with teachers have also been linked to several positive outcomes for students (Baker, 2006; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, & Pianta, 2002; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). However, more research is needed to understand how student-teacher relationships develop and what contributes to their quality, especially for bilingual students who may not have developed fluent English language skills in order to successfully verbally communicate with English speaking teachers. It is possible that language and the ability to communicate may influence

interactions between students and teachers and consequently, the development of their attachment relationships.

Language is central to communication and therefore, is likely a key facilitating factor in relationships. While research points to the positive outcomes associated with both language development and student-teacher relationships, it is important to understand the link between the two and also how they influence each other. Studies have highlighted the role of attachment relationships in facilitating bilingual language skills (Oades-Sese & Li, 2011). However, given that 5.5% of the school-age population consists of English language learners (Fleishman & Hopstock, 1993), there is little research examining how language abilities foster or impede the student-teacher relationship, particularly in English-Spanish bilingual children who may experience difficulty communicating with English speaking teachers when the children's language proficiency skills are low. Thus, it is important to first define these important early relationships and understand their role in developmental outcomes in order to discuss the role of language ability and how it may influence the development of these relationships or attachments.

### **Attachment and Relationships**

Essential to attachment theory is the caregiver's warmth and responsiveness to the child (Bowlby, 1988). This theory posits that the degree to which the early relationship with a caregiver, generally referred to as the mother, is warm, responsive, and supportive is likely to predict two attachment trajectories: secure and insecure attachment. Bowlby (1988) suggests that these attachment patterns in infancy and childhood predict mental functioning (e.g., adjustment) throughout the life span.

The pattern of attachment that is most associated with healthy development is “secure” attachment. This pattern is promoted by a caregiver being readily available, sensitive to the child’s signals, and responsive when the child seeks protection, comfort, or support (Bowlby, 1988). A secure attachment relationship with a caregiver provides high-quality communication that is “open, direct, coherent, and fluent” and is not controlling (De Wolff & von IJzendoorn, 1997).

The second pattern of attachment is “insecure” attachment. These children exhibit uncertainty about whether his or her parent will be available or responsive when needed. This pattern is promoted by a caregiver being available and helpful on an inconsistent basis and later in life may utilize threats of abandonment as a means to establish control over the child (Bowlby, 1988). As a result, the child tends to be clingy and anxious about becoming self-sufficient. These children may also exhibit a lack of confidence that when they seek help or care, and do not anticipate that their caregiver will respond effectively. These children tend to expect rejection and are often neglected by caregivers. Evidence suggests that insecure attachment patterns with caregivers are associated with a variety of delinquent behaviors, as well as adverse developmental outcomes for children (Bowlby, 1988).

Bowlby (1988) suggests these attachment relationships to caregivers begins in the early months of life when behavior is activated by basic needs such as fatigue, hunger, or pain and is organized based on the caregiver’s accessibility to satiate those needs. Studies have shown that as young as 49 weeks of age, infants display significant behavioral responses to the absence or presence of their mother (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). For example, an infant may cry at being separating from his or her mother, and

feel comforted upon her return. These early relationship and attachment patterns provide an internal working model of relationships which serves as important structure necessary to interpret and navigate subsequent social situations. While this internal working model serves as a template for future relationships, initial or early attachments are not set in stone. Studies have shown that behavioral changes by caregivers can modify the attachment relationship (Egeland & Farber, 1984). However, if positive relationships with caregivers are consistent in early childhood, the child is equipped with a positive working framework to build subsequent relationships. Conversely, consistent negative relationships or insecure attachments provide children with a faulty internal working model which can influence the trajectory of future relationships. Furthermore, young children utilize this existing framework created with early caregivers in developing successive relationships in classrooms when teachers become important caregivers outside of the home.

### **Student-teacher Relationships and Attachment**

Attachment to early caregivers provides an important framework for interpreting environmental surroundings, interacting with others, and many other important skills necessary for growth and development, subsequent relationships, and academic and social-emotional success (Bretherton, 1990; Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, Hennon, & Hooper, 2006). However, when a child reaches school age, he or she is confronted with a new situation in which he or she has limited access to the comforting relationship with primary caregivers. As a result, the child utilizes this internal framework to build attachments to teachers (DeMulder, Denham, Schmidt, & Mitchell, 2000). These attachments may produce similar protective factors in children, thus facilitating positive

outcomes. This may be particularly important for children experiencing a stressful relationship with a parent or stressful home environments. Researchers have defined positive relationships with teachers as those that support the student's motivation to explore, in addition to regulation of social, emotional, and cognitive skills by focusing on dimensions relevant to the parent-child relationship such as, emotional closeness, conflict, and dependency (Davis, 2003). Early relationships with both caregivers and teachers seek to encourage intellectual exploration and increase the development of social competence in children (Davis, 2003). Thus it is not surprising that positive relationships with these important early caregivers contribute to a variety of adaptive academic and behavioral outcomes.

Relationships and social interactions in the classroom may serve as protective factors in light of stressful home environments. This may be the case for Hispanic bilingual preschool children living in poverty, regardless of attachment to a parent (Oades-Sese & Li, 2011). Attachment in the classroom provides a sense of security which facilitates exploration of surroundings along with a foundation for socializing with other children (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Similar to parent-child attachment, these two factors provide children with the ability to successfully navigate and interpret their environments at school which may contribute to academic success. When adults are sensitive, responsive, and aware of the child's abilities, they are able to learn as a result of appropriate guidance by these caregivers (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006). Consequently, research has indicated that positive relationships with teachers are associated with higher academic achievement for students, and especially Hispanic students (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004)

Children identified as at-risk for academic issues may benefit from a positive relationship with a teacher and fare better academically when faced with challenges at home. In inner city school populations, research suggests that Kindergarten teacher-child relationships may serve as predictors of academic and behavioral outcomes in later school years (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Specifically, a poor student-teacher relationship was related to maladjustment, lower grades, lower standardized test scores, and poorer work habits in elementary and junior high school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Additionally, research shows that student closeness to teacher and absence of conflict or frustration, two primary factors of student-teacher relationships, are significant predictors of teachers' perceptions of student achievement in first grade (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Characteristics marked by positive student-teacher relationships such as closeness and lack of conflict are related to the central tenants of warmth and responsiveness in the early caregiver attachment theory.

Furthermore, studies on African American and Hispanic, low-income, urban youth revealed that positive relationships with teachers and better school climates predict school adjustment and better social skills in first and second grades. Positive relationships with teachers also predict better mathematic and reading achievement scores in first grade (Esposito, 1999). Furthermore, Kindergarteners with warm, close, communicative relationships with their teachers also made better adjustments in transitions from home to school (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 2009). This suggests that positive student-teacher relationships predict more positive behavioral, social, and academic outcomes, and lengthened the importance of these protective factors to

outcomes later in life if consistent over time with the change of teachers year after year (Baker, 2006).

Research also shows a close relationship with a teacher is positively related to language skills and reading competence, particularly for African American children, and also for children experiencing harsher parenting styles in the home (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, & Pianta, 2002). This is important for bilingual, Hispanic students as many are exposed to English and Spanish. Increasing English language skills for students through positive relationships with teachers may serve as an additional protective factor.

However, lack of language skills may also impact the ability to develop close relationships with teachers. Given that the bond experienced with teachers at school has the potential to counteract hardships children face at home, this remains an important area of research in order to understand how to best foster this relationship for students.

However, for bilingual children, there is a lack of research examining the effects of English language skill level on the student-teacher relationships which is likely a key facilitator in developing this relationship at school where the majority of teachers are English speaking.

### **Language Development and Relationships**

The socialization process is accomplished primarily through language (Madding, 2002). Social-pragmatic theories of language learning highlight the importance of early interactions with parents and adults as a social process whereby children learn words and learn to read intentions of others (Tomasello, 2003). In fact, children learn language mostly through interacting with others. Some research suggests that second born children are more advanced in certain areas of language development possibly due to overheard

conversations between older siblings and caregivers (Oshima-Takane & Goodz, 1996) and more specifically, exhibit increased conversational skills (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). However, research suggests that children from mid socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds show less lexical (vocabulary pertaining to nouns) language development and conversational language skills when compared to higher SES children (Hoff-Ginsberg, 1998). In terms of bilingualism, young children living in low-income families exposed to English and Spanish have been shown to exhibit significantly less English vocabulary knowledge than monolingual English children (Vagh, Pan, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2009). While it is clear that language development is facilitated by relationships (Karrass & Braungart-Rieker, 2003), social-emotional development (Madding, 2002), and communication patterns (Hoff-Ginsberg, E, 1998; Oshima-Takane & Goodz, 1996), research is about the reciprocal nature of this relationship. Specifically, research has done little to investigate how language development fosters or impedes the development of interpersonal relationships for children and particularly with teachers in school, although some related research on temperamental differences among children indicates that this may in fact be the case (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010).

Bilingualism has been conceptualized as the ability to speak, listen, read, and/or write in more than one language with varying levels of proficiency (Brice, 2002). Specifically, a native dominant speaker often shows proficiency in Spanish language skills and little English proficiency where as an English dominant speaker shows the opposite with proficiency in English and not in Spanish. Additionally, a balanced bilingual student shows a high degree of proficiency in both languages and low bilingual proficiency shows minimal proficiency in both languages. It may be possible that low

level English language skills affect students' ability to communicate with teachers of English speaking classrooms and therefore, may negatively affect factors related to the student-teacher relationship, such as closeness and conflict.

As children transition from home to school, they also transition from individual contact with parents and siblings to contact with teachers. As previously indicated, this presents a new challenge, especially for young bilingual children as they start to build relationships with teachers and peers at school. While research indicates that children can translate the parent-child attachment relationship to the teacher relationship, research does little to investigate how language skills and the ability to verbally communicate affect this process. English language abilities are essential to academic success in later school years, as the United States' public school system is designed to meet the needs of English-speaking student populations. However, for bilingual children, fostering the development of the native language facilitates the learning of a second language such as English (Cummins, 1991). Indeed, quality of interpersonal relationships at school inevitably influences patterns of conversations which also have an impact on the child's learning environment.

Individuals must have a means of jointly communicating through verbal or nonverbal means. For students in the United States, English language skills are likely an important factor in relationship building with teachers and peers. In the classroom, verbal communication is mainly dominated by teacher initiated conversation (Geekie & Raban, 1994). Research has shown a general positive correlation between children's language skills and teachers' reports of the quality of the student-teacher relationship (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Additionally, research has shown that teachers are more likely to

respond to students who are more engaging and less likely to respond in positive ways to children who are more passive (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). It is possible that teachers initiate and engage in conversation more with students who are able to reciprocate this communication and therefore, increase closeness experienced with students. However, bilingual students, or students with limited English proficiency, may not have the skills developed to verbally reciprocate communication with teachers.

Additionally, research has investigated the effects of temperament on student-teacher relationships as it relates to shy and withdrawn children. This is relevant information due to the lack of interaction and communication that shy and withdrawn children experience with teachers and other individuals even though it does not focus on language skills specifically. Research has indicated that shyer children with fewer interactions with teachers in the classrooms are less likely to have close relationships with their teachers (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Similarly, withdrawn children tend to exhibit lower levels of closeness, higher levels of dependency, and higher levels of conflict in their relationships with teachers (Ladd & Burgess, 1999). It is possible that this lack of spoken communication negatively affects the student-teacher relationship and thus contributes to students experiencing their relationships with teachers as less close and increased in conflict and frustration. Research has also shown that lower levels of language skills were strongly associated with disruptive behavior and poor peer relationships in a low income, minority preschool sample (Stowe, Arnold, & Ortiz, 1999), which suggests that low language skills may be related to unsuccessful peer relationships in early childhood.

It is important to note that the emphasis on attaining proficient English language skills is not meant to diminish the importance of native Spanish language skills for bilingual children. In fact, studies show that fluent bilingualism in both languages is related to higher academic achievement than monolingual students (Golash-Boza, 2005). The focal point of this study is on the effects of English language skills given the fact that this is the primary spoken language by teachers for instructing students.

### **Present Study**

Research has highlighted the importance of early relationships in developmental trajectories of students, and particularly those exposed to a variety of risk factors. Early relationships with caregivers provide an important framework for the development of subsequent relationships with teachers at school which can provide a protective factor for children faced with stressful home lives. When children begin school they are challenged with interactions with teachers as new caregivers outside of the home, and thus begin to build relationships with these important figures. However, when relationships at home provide a faulty internal framework for social interaction, positive student-teacher relationships may buffer negative effects of these stressors and foster better outcomes for children (Oades-Sese & Li, 2011). Teachers perceive their relationships with children to be positive when they experience low levels of conflict and dependency, and higher levels of closeness (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006).

Research and theory posit that language is socially learned through interactions and observations with others. Indeed, language is an important factor for successful interpersonal relationships with others. However, there is little research examining the effects that language abilities have on the development of student-teacher relationships.

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how language skills affect factors related to positive student-teacher relationships. This study will address the following questions:

1. Do bilingual students with higher proficiency in English oral language skills experience greater closeness with teachers?
2. Do bilingual students with higher proficiency in English or Spanish oral language skills experience more conflict with teachers?
3. Do bilingual students with higher proficiency in English or Spanish oral language skills experience less dependency on their teachers?

Given the importance of communication in language development, it is expected that students with greater proficiency in oral English language skills will experience less conflict, greater closeness, and less dependency on teachers, thus indicating a more positive student-teacher relationship in the context of primarily English instruction in the classroom.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study was a part of Project Resilience, a 3-year longitudinal study examining the academic and social-emotional resilience of Hispanic American preschool children. Participants were from an urban school district in the Northeast. This school district is one of 39 in the state that has been identified as having the lowest socioeconomic level based on the percentage of adults without a high school diploma, occupational status, employment/unemployment rate, and median family income. A total of 66 teachers completed surveys for the participating children in their classrooms. Eligibility for free or reduced-free lunch for the children indicated their low socioeconomic status for this

study. There were a total of 472 children included in Project Resilience. Of this total, 313 children were included in this study due to incomplete data. Demographic characteristics for the entire sample participating in Project Resilience are located in Table 1.

## **Measures**

**Language skills.** The Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey – Revised English and Spanish forms (WMLS-R; Woodcock, Muñoz-Sandoval, Ruef, & Alvarado, 2005) provide a comprehensive measure of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English and Spanish. For the purposes of this study, only the Oral Language Total cluster within the WMLS-R was used because this cluster specifically measures language competency, including listening and speaking skills in both languages. This ability cluster includes the Picture Vocabulary, Verbal Analogies, Understanding Directions, and Story Recall subtests. The median internal consistency reliabilities reported in the test manual were .95 for age 4 and .96 for age 5.

**Student-teacher relationship.** The Student-Teacher Relationships Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001) assesses teachers' perceptions of their relationship with a student. Teachers completed a separate STRS for each student. The STRS consists of 28 items using a 5-point Likert scale. The STRS is composed of 3 subscales: Closeness, Dependency, and Conflict. The Closeness subscale (11 items) measures the degree to which a teacher experiences affection, warmth, and open communication with a student. The Dependency scale (5 items) measures the extent to which a teacher perceives a student as overly dependent on him or her in the classroom. Lastly, the Conflict subscale (12 items) measures the degree to which the teacher perceives the relationship with a student as

negative and conflictual. For this study sample, the Conflict scale had a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .84, the Closeness subscale had a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .89, and the Dependency subscale had a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .34. High scores in a subscale indicate higher levels in that dimension.

### **Procedure**

As part of Project Resilience in the spring of 2008, letters describing the project and teacher and parental consent forms were distributed to classrooms to send home. Students were recruited to participate in this study based on the following criteria: eligibility for free or reduced-free lunch, being of Hispanic descent, and being a general education student. In the spring of 2008, teachers completed measures that assessed teacher-child relationships. Additionally, each child was administered a standardized English and Spanish oral language proficiency tests, counterbalanced, and approximately two weeks apart in order to reduce fatigue. Children received stickers to maintain their motivation during testing and school supplies at the end of testing.

### **Statistical Procedures**

Hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted in SPSS 19 to understand the influences of child English and Spanish language abilities on the closeness in teacher-child relationships. Analyses were conducted in three three-step models with STRS subscales Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency scores as respective outcome variables. The models included gender, age, language abilities (WMLS-R Oral Language Total Standard Scores: English and Spanish) as predictors, as well as two interaction terms of gender with both WMLS-R English and Spanish scores. The initial model to predict STRS subscale scores included gender and age as predictors. English and Spanish

language abilities derived from the WMLS-R were entered into the second model. The third model included the two interaction terms.

To analyze STRS Closeness, Conflict, and Dependency subtest scores, raw scores for each subtest were converted to T-scores using SPSS 19.0 with a T-score of 50 as the mean. Gender was coded as dummy variables, using 0 for females and 1 for males. The means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for all continuous variables are presented in Table 2. Zero-order correlation results indicated that English and Spanish oral language skills had a low but significant relationship with STRS Closeness, with English measures having a greater relationship with closeness to teacher. STRS Closeness had a low but significant relationship with STRS Dependency. Listwise deletion of cases was used to account for missing data in the analyses.

## **Results**

### **Associations Between Predictors and STRS Closeness**

Results of a hierarchical linear regression analysis for STRS Closeness are reported in Table 3. In the initial model, age and gender combined accounted for 4.0% of the variance,  $R^2 = 0.04$ ,  $F(2, 310) = 6.47$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . Male students scored lower than female students on STRS Closeness ( $B = -0.18$ ). However, age alone did not contribute to the variance. An additional 13.0% of the variance in STRS Closeness was explained with the addition of the WMLS-R Oral Language Total scores for both English and Spanish,  $R^2 = 0.17$ ,  $F(2, 308) = 23.11$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . WMLS-R Oral Language Total English abilities were more positively associated with STRS Closeness than WMLS-R Oral Language Total Spanish abilities ( $B = 0.34$  and  $B = 0.19$  respectively). Two interaction

terms were entered in Model 3. The addition of these two variables did not contribute to the variance in STRS Closeness as they were not significant.

### **Associations Between Predictors and STRS Conflict**

Table 4 describes results for the hierarchical linear regression for STRS Conflict. Gender was a significant predictor of STRS Conflict, explaining 2.0% of the variance,  $R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $F(2, 310) = 3.179$ ,  $p = 0.043$ . Males experienced more conflict than females ( $B = 0.13$ ). WMLS-R Oral Language Total scores for Spanish and English did not contribute any additional variance in STRS Conflict as results were not significant. Additionally, the interaction terms of age and language were examined in preliminary analyses and were not significant.

### *Associations Between Predictors and STRS Dependency*

Table 5 describes results for the hierarchical linear regression for STRS Dependency. All predictors in the three models were not significant. Additionally, age and language interaction terms were examined in preliminary analyses and were not significant.

## **Discussion**

Children living in impoverished conditions are exposed to a variety of risk factors that may ultimately contribute to adverse outcomes. Thus, it is important to identify protective factors to alleviate these circumstances and promote or facilitate positive outcomes in children. Positive relationships can serve this protective role by buffering the negative effects that risk factors can impose on the lives of children (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Research has shown that positive relationships with teachers can promote better academic performance, greater emotional regulation and

social competence, better school adjustment, and greater response to interventions (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995).

This study focused on language competence, an important factor in developing interpersonal relationships, and its effect on teachers' perceptions of relationships with students. Specifically, this study examined the effects of English and Spanish oral language abilities on factors associated with student-teacher relationships such as, closeness, conflict, and dependency. While research has shown that close relationships with teachers can facilitate language acquisition (Oades-Sese & Li, 2011), this is one of the few studies examining this relationship from an alternative perspective.

Consistent with the body of research on communication and relationships, this study showed that students with more proficient English language skills exhibited closer relationships with teachers. Teachers in this study were more likely to rate their relationships as closer with students exhibiting more proficient English language skills than students with lower English language skills or better Spanish language skills. This association was expected given the importance of communication in developing interpersonal relationships in primarily English speaking classrooms. Children with better language skills tend to engage in classroom activities and initiate more interactions than children with language delays (Qi & Kaiser, 2004). While communication in classrooms is frequently lead by teacher dominated interactions (Geekie & Raban, 1994), less conversationally skilled children have a tendency to experience even more teacher directed conversation (Girolametto, Hoaken, Weitzman, & van Lieshout, 2000), which may inhibit their opportunities to initiate interactions or participate in mutual exchanges.

Children who exhibit more proficient language skills may have more opportunities to interact with teachers and may initiate these interactions more often, thereby increasing closeness and facilitating a more positive relationship.

Additionally, this study showed that teachers perceived their relationships with male students as having more conflict and lower closeness, while none of the factors contributed to teacher perceived student dependency. It is expected that students experiencing more conflict would concurrently experience lower closeness. However, research tends to focus on behavioral aspects of student development regardless of gender which is inconsistent with the results of this study. Specifically, research suggests that students with behavioral difficulties (Pianta & Nimetz, 1991) and more impulsively assertive personalities (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006) experience greater levels of conflict and dependency with teachers. Consistent with this study, some research has indicated that males tend to experience greater levels of conflict with teachers than females (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009). Lastly, some research has indicated that more impulsively assertive children with less proficient language skills are perceived as more dependent than shyer children with better language skills (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006). This study examined language abilities as predictors of the teacher-child relationship and did not take into account temperamental and behavioral differences. Therefore, it is difficult to make inferences based on gender differences in isolation from other factors.

This study had a number of limitations that should be discussed. First, missing data were addressed using the listwise deletion method. A multiple imputation technique to determine missing values may have been appropriate in order to understand the

complete data set. Additionally, given that this is a cross-sectional study, the results cannot predict whether these relationships will persist over time. Longitudinal studies are needed in order to understand the long-term trajectories of these factors in relation to the student-teacher relationship.

Findings of this study highlight the importance of teacher professional development and awareness regarding second language development and student-teacher relationships. Given that preschool is the first school experience, it is important to start the schooling process in a positive manner which will set the state for later school adjustment. Yet, research has shown that general education teachers feel that they lack adequate training to work with English language learners (Reeves, 2006) and also lack understanding of second language acquisition and learning (Karabenick & Clemens Noda, 2004). It is important for teachers to be aware of these processes and also the impact that student language proficiency may have on interactions in the classroom, especially for English language learners. Increasing this awareness may encourage teachers to identify and seek interactions with students that have less developed English language skills in United States' classroom. This will help to provide additional support to the student in the classroom and increase closeness experienced in the student-teacher relationship.

Additionally, professional development for teachers of English language learners should focus on increasing teachers' self efficacy by providing knowledge and tools for interacting and communicating with English language learners in order to promote student language development and academic achievement. Recommendations for professional development also highlights the importance of ongoing teacher in-service

training in order to provide the proper support necessary to adequately gain the knowledge and tools, as compared to one or two trainings over the course of the year (Reeves, 2006).

It is important to note that implications do not suggest that bilingual students be encouraged to learn English language skills in order to be successful in American classrooms and Spanish language skills should be de-emphasized. Rather, fostering native language development facilitates second language acquisition (Cummins 1991). Furthermore, fluent bilingualism has been linked to greater gains in academic performance than monolingual students (Golash-Boza, 2005). Consequently, professional development activities should challenge the common misconception that English language learners should avoid using their native language as they acquire English skills (Reeves, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to better understand factors that contribute to positive student-teacher relationships in a context of mostly monolingual English speaking school teachers in order to best foster their development for children and to provide an important protective factor. Research suggests that children who receive less support from teachers in adjusting to school are more likely to withdraw and experience poorer academic and social-emotional outcomes (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; McCargar, 1993). Research suggests that it is important for teachers of English language learners to promote language use and verbal interaction with both teachers and with peers (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998). During conversation, teachers have been encouraged to provide English language learners with feedback in order to facilitate their language construction. Specifically, the use of paraphrasing (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998) and scaffolding can be particularly useful as

it allows the student the ability to co-construct a response with the teacher during conversation (de Jong & Harper, 2005). Additionally, teachers should structure activities that support student initiated discussion, as this promotes a classroom environment supportive of their emergent language and cultural competence (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998). Lastly, teacher should encourage beginner English language learners to participate in teacher-structured, yet supportive, interactions in which the teacher encourages the use of nonverbal communicative repertoires such as pointing, adding features to diagrams, and demonstrating problem solving on the board (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998).

Future studies should focus on the longitudinal nature of language development and student-teacher relationships in order to understand whether or not this relationship persists over time. Given that positive student-teacher relationships facilitate achievement, social-emotional development, and language development over time, it is likely that as language skills increase, so will positive interactions. Furthermore, future studies should include temperamental aspects, such as shyness and assertiveness, in addition to language skills on the student-teacher relationship since these are important factors in seeking interactions in the classroom. Lastly, another important factor to consider in future studies includes temperamental and adult attachment factors of teachers. Specifically, teachers also experience temperamental differences, such as varying levels shyness, similarly to children. Consequently, these may be important factors, along with language skills, to consider in the development of student-teacher relationships.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of language skills in influencing the development of positive student-teacher relationships in English-Spanish

bilingual children. These relationships are related to numerous positive developmental outcomes, especially for children living in impoverished conditions. Tailoring professional development activities for early education teachers to increase knowledge regarding second language acquisition and also to encourage identification and enhance interaction with students lacking language proficiency needed to communicate is an important tool for creating awareness concerning important aspects of developing positive relationships with students. This will help to not only increase teacher awareness, but also to provide additional support for bilingual children in the classroom.

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## APPENDICES

Table 1  
*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>% Missing</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Child Characteristics</b>					
Age	468		1.27%	4.42	0.60
Gender	472		0.42%		
Female	242	51.05%			
Male	230	48.52%			
<b>WMLS-R Language Skills</b>					
English Oral Language Total	352		25.74%		
Spanish Oral Language Total	403		15.98%		
<b>STRS</b>					
Closeness	419		11.60%		
Conflict	419		11.60%		
Dependency	420		11.39%		

Note: WMLS-R = Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey – Revised.

Table 2  
*Zero-order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for All Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. WMLS-R Oral Lang Total-English	-				
2. WMLS-R Oral Lang Total-Spanish	-.13*	-			
3. STRS Closeness	.33**	.13*	-		
4. STRS Conflict	-.051	-.072	-.37**	-	
5. STRS Dependency	-.006	.048	.035	.38**	-
Mean	80.68	54.97	50.16	50.25	50.10
SD	23.58	26.18	9.79	10.40	10.04

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 3  
*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Student-Teacher Closeness from Age, Gender, Language Skills*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI
Constant									
Gender (1 = male)	-0.18**	1.09	[-5.90, -5.53]	-0.12*	1.04	[-4.55, 4.31]	-0.17	4.59	[-12.51, 12.17]
Age	-0.12	0.95	[-0.69, -0.45]	0.03	0.90	[-1.23, 1.29]	0.03	0.91	[-1.24, 1.30]
WMLS-R									
Oral Language Total – Spanish				0.19***	0.02	[-0.13, 0.51]	0.18	0.06	[-0.37, 0.24]
Oral Language Total - English				0.34***	0.02	[0.25, 0.43]	0.30	0.07	[0.29, 0.31]
Gender X Spanish							0.01	0.04	[-0.07, 0.09]
Gender X English							0.05	0.04	[-0.03, 0.13]
Model R <sup>2</sup>	0.04			0.17			0.17		
Change in R <sup>2</sup>	0.04			0.13			0.00		
<i>F</i>	6.47			23.11			0.03		
<i>df</i> (Residual)	310			308			306		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 4

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Student-Teacher Conflict From Age, Gender, and Language Skills*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI
Constant									
Gender (1 = male)	0.13*	1.17	[-0.23, 0.49]	0.12	1.19	[0.07, 0.17]	0.08	5.26	[-8.64, 8.80]
Age	0.07	1.02	[-0.73, 0.87]	0.08	1.03	[-0.59, 0.75]	0.08	1.05	[-0.61, 0.77]
WMLS-R									
Oral Language Total – Spanish				-0.05	0.02	[-0.12, 0.02]	-0.02	0.07	[-0.17, 0.13]
Oral Language Total - English				-0.06	0.03	[-0.02, 0.14]	-0.12	0.08	[-0.33, 0.09]
Gender X Spanish							-0.05	0.05	[-0.15, 0.05]
Gender X English							0.08	0.05	[-0.003, 0.16]
Model R <sup>2</sup>	0.02			0.03			0.03		
Change in R <sup>2</sup>	0.02			0.01			0.00		
<i>F</i>	3.18			0.85			0.09		
<i>df</i> (Residual)	310			308			306		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 5

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Student-Teacher Dependency From Age, Gender, and Language Skills*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI
Constant									
Gender (1 = male)	0.000	1.14	[-2.24, 2.24]	0.01	1.16	[-2.05, 2.16]	0.40	5.10	[-1.58, 2.38]
Age	0.70	1.00	[-0.03, 1.43]	0.07	1.00	[-0.65, 0.7]	0.06	1.01	[-0.90, 1.02]
WMLS-R									
Oral Language Total – Spanish				0.06	0.02	[0.04, 0.08]	0.31	0.07	[0.30, 0.33]
Oral Language Total - English				-0.01	0.03	[-0.06, 0.04]	0.18	0.08	[0.11, 0.25]
Gender X Spanish							-0.30	0.05	[-0.46, -0.16]
Gender X English							-0.27	0.05	[-0.42, -0.12]
Model R <sup>2</sup>	0.01			0.01			0.02		
Change in R <sup>2</sup>	0.01			0.00			0.01		
<i>F</i>	0.77			0.65			1.45		
<i>df</i> (Residual)	311			309			307		

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$