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Valdés, Guadalupe; Capitelli, Sara & Alvarez, Laura (2011).  
*Latino Children Learning English: Steps In The Journey*. NY:  
Teachers College Press.

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Paired with stringent accountability for test performance, growing linguistic diversity in schools has led educators to scrutinize instruction for English language learners (ELLs). Added to the challenge of high-stakes testing mandated by NCLB (2002) is the linguistic isolation of many schools serving ELLs. Linguistically isolated schools primarily enroll ELLs who speak the same native language and rarely use English among each other, limiting opportunities to interact meaningfully in English. In *Latino Children Learning English*, Valdés, Capitelli, & Alvarez (2010) nobly undertake the daunting task to improve the English education of Latino children at a California linguistically isolated school with Spanish-speaking students.

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Organized in a way that is reminiscent of a dissertation or empirical study, Valdés et al. devotes the bulk of their book describing the context, methods, results, and implications of their study. Called *One-on-One English*, the authors' intervention consisted of a five-year after school language program at an under-resourced elementary school in which few children matriculated from the school's English language development program. Theorizing that ELLs' lack of progress in English language development is a function of too few models of "ordinary speakers of English" (p. 72), Valdés et al. trained undergraduate and community volunteers to work individually with K-3 Latino ELLs identified as "most in need of English language intervention" (p. 12). As English buddies, volunteers interacted with the children four days a week, providing them with rich opportunities to use English in the context of picture books, puppets, and games.

Before giving details of the design methodology, the authors present an overview of the field of second language acquisition, effectively providing readers with the context in which the study emerged. Written exclusively by Valdés, Chapter 1 begins with a concise summary of the development of the field of second language acquisition, from early work in structural linguistics and behaviorism to a more contemporary focus on communicative language. Valdés tackles dilemmas in the field, such as the often-contradicting social and cognitive perspectives on language acquisition, and then laments that second language acquisition theory rarely guides teaching practice. She problematizes current English language development teaching because of its myopic attention to standardized assessment measures rather than theories underlying language development. Acknowledging the relative dearth of research on child second language acquisition in school and naturalistic settings, Valdés offers her present study as a contribution to the field.

The authors devote Chapter 2 to a transparent explanation the methodology of the research design of *One on One English*. Although reading minute details of the study may be tedious for readers, Valdés et al.'s level of detail lends credence to their study, and they make the jargon-laden language of research comprehensible to practitioners. The

authors first describe the school setting and then define clearly the notion of design experiments for readers unfamiliar with research methods. Specifically, they describe design research as “interventionist, iterative, process oriented, and both utility and theory oriented” (p. 47). They include diagrams to contrast design research to more traditional predictive research methods. Design research was particularly helpful for *One on One English* because it allowed them simultaneously to implement, analyze, and modify procedures throughout the five-year experiment. Valdés et al. then meticulously describe the specific procedural elements of *One-on-One English*, including logistical arrangements, recruitment and training of volunteers, instructional materials, language development measures, and analytic procedures.

Chapters 3-5 take readers inside *One-on-One English*, with Chapter 3 illustrating the types of interactions observed between ELLs and their buddies and Chapters 4 and 5 analyzing the linguistic progress of the nine focal children. The authors report on their results using careful discourse analysis. In fact, many of the pages in Chapter 4 and 5 are filled with direct transcriptions of conversations, enabling readers to experience the intervention firsthand. Valdés et al. do not sugarcoat their intervention, as they honestly describe instances of unskilled tutors and uncooperative children alongside with rich language interactions that may not have occurred in the absence of *One-on-One English*.

In Chapter 3, the authors use transcribed data to suggest three principal types of interactions in which ELLs and their English buddies participated (i.e., engaging and telling, eliciting and evaluating, and game playing). Overall, the authors found that ELLs appeared more engaged in authentic interactions in which they had an equal part in the conversation. In contrast, interactions that resembled Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) sequences in the classroom resulted in lower engagement. Interestingly, the authors concluded that “volunteers and children behaved quite differently at various times” (p. 95), implying that interactions could not be predicted.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the authors explore the language growth of nine focal ELLs. Chapter 4 addresses growth observed through video and audio analysis during the

intervention, whereas Chapter 5 addresses growth measured by annual pre- and post-assessments that required students to retell a picture book. Although the authors found a general upward trend in children's English language use, they highlight that growth was uneven and non-linear within and across the focal children. Rather than championing their intervention as a quick fix in education, Valdés et al. use *Latino Children Learning English* as an opportunity to shed light on unpredictable nature of language development. They posit that language use is dependent on "individual differences in children and varying opportunities for interacting in English" (p.133). Moreover, in Chapter 5, Valdés et al. demonstrate the how language growth observed in the focal children does not match the trajectory outlined in many English language development standards. The authors suggest that second language development should be "considered in terms of increased variety of language forms, rather than in terms of accuracy" (p. 164). Instead of expecting for ELLs to acquire native-like grammatical precision, Valdés et al. calls for English language development programs to set standards of communicative competence in school. While the authors provide detailed methodology and results of the study, they do not shy away from confronting major complexities in the fields of second language acquisition and English language development. Chapter 6 returns to some of the controversial dilemmas that Valdés introduced in chapter 1. Valdés et al. are honest about the limitations of their relatively small study and do not make claims that their intervention is a key to closing the achievement gap for ELLs. Instead, the authors show how *One-on-One English* provides insight to second language acquisition and the challenges faced by schools serving ELLs. After underscoring the importance of meaningful interactions in English for ELLs, the authors offer a working framework that conceptualizes three dimensions of school communication, including interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational tasks. The framework accounts for the number of interlocutors (e.g., one-to-one, one-to-many) involved as well as the types of skills (e.g., receptive or productive) required for school tasks. Valdés et al. use their framework to present practical principles for an integrated approach to English language instruction. Their four principles prioritize exposure to and use of oral and written English in meaningful contexts, as well as assessments that measure

students' ability to achieve in grade level work rather than their linguistic accuracy.

Valdés et al.'s work makes an important contribution to the field of child second language acquisition. Although their study only addressed Latino children in one California school, when paired with existing theory their findings can inform the education of ELLs in other contexts. Identifying weaknesses in the text is difficult since the authors are up front about the limitations to their design experiment. Perhaps practitioners looking for cure-all strategies to enhance English language instruction would be disappointed in Valdés et al.'s book. Even though the authors describe materials used and successful interactions between English buddies and ELLs, the nature of their intensive one-on-one intervention is not practical for most schools. However, the overarching purpose of *Latino Children Learning English* is not the identification of practical strategies to use in the classroom. Rather, the authors use their design experiment to call into question common methods of educating ELLs. Valdés et al.'s book is appropriate for educators, researchers, and policy-makers who wish to think deeply about ways schools can modify instruction and assessment to align with existing and emerging knowledge of the ways children learn English.

Another potential weakness in Valdés et al.'s work is that the language they use in discussing the intervention arguably implies a deficiency perspective. That is, the premise of the intervention assumes that ELLs are deficient to their native-English speaking peers. Such language can be seen, for instance, in the selection of "quality children's books thought to be important in the lives of English-speaking, middle-class, American children" for use in *One-to-One English* (p. 180).

Additionally, the authors trained volunteers to refrain from communicating to children in Spanish other than "just in time Spanish", and there were no instances of drawing on students' funds of knowledge from their homes. On one hand, exposure to middle-class, English-speaking literacy and language experiences is central to the goal of providing ELLs with access to the language of power (i.e., English) in school and society. However, on the other hand, Valdés et al. are not acknowledging studies that

demonstrate the transference of language and literacy in the native language to a new language. Moreover, *One-on-One English* may unintentionally devalue ELLs' home language and culture. Given Valdés' previous work on immigrant students (see for example, Valdés, 2000), it is highly unlikely that the authors did not consider the importance of ELLs' home language and culture. Instead, explicitly engaging ELLs' home culture and language was probably outside the scope of the research project. Even though Valdés et al. are clear that *One-on-One English* is not a comprehensive solution to educating ELLs, a brief explanation on the significance of valuing students' home languages and cultures may prevent potential misconceptions that the authors do not value ELLs' backgrounds.

Despite potential weaknesses, *Latino Children Learning English* succeeds in complicating contemporary schooling practices for ELLs. Valdés et al. balance theory with practical considerations in discussing how *One-on-One English* can inform school policies. The authors admittedly do not provide an easy solution to the formidable challenges or frequent controversies facing the English language development of Latino children. However, their carefully executed design experiment and thoughtful analyses beg policy-makers and educators to pause in their rush to fix the Latino education crisis and consider how theories on children how children learn English might align with instruction and assessment.

## About the Reviewer

Lottie Marzucco is a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at George Washington University. Her interests are in immigrant education and second language acquisition. Marzucco has taught English as a Second Language (ESL) at the elementary and community college levels. She currently works at George Washington University's Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (GW-CEEE) to provide technical assistance and professional development regarding English language learners (ELLs). Marzucco graduated with a bachelors and masters degree from the University of Virginia.

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