Habla Arte: bilingual arts practices that legitimize multilingual voices in school

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Abstract
In multilingual school contexts, language operates not only as a medium of instruction but as a cultural practice through which norms of belonging and linguistic legitimacy are constructed. Grounded in sociocultural theory and critical perspectives on language ideology, this study examines how English-only school practices are associated with students' language beliefs and communicative confidence. We investigate whether inclusive bilingual programming can reshape communication norms in school spaces. The overall program was conducted in Southern California with 45 students (M age = 7.76; range = 5–10) who participated in Habla Arte, a year-long bilingual arts and public speaking program. Using a pre–post design drawing on student surveys and teacher reports, supplemented by student artifacts, testimonies and instructor reflective notes, we analysed shifts in students' perceptions of Spanish as a legitimate academic language and in their communicative confidence following participation in the program. Prior to the program, 78% of students (n = 35) reported uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school settings, and 80% (n = 36) reported low confidence in artistic expression and public speaking. Following participation, 80% (n = 36) reported greater comfort using Spanish and learning bilingually in school, 91% (n=41) demonstrated increased communicative confidence, and 80% of teachers observed improved academic engagement. Findings suggest that inclusive, arts-based bilingual practices may function as culture-producing mechanisms that modify communicative norms and legitimize multilingual voices. The study contributes to research on bilingual education by conceptualizing inclusive bilingual programming as a structural intervention in school culture rather than solely a linguistic accommodation.

Keywords: *bilingual education, bilingualism, translanguaging, bilingual experience, arts-integrated instruction, multimodal pedagogy*

Linguistic diversity and educational contexts in the United States

Linguistic diversity is now a defining feature of U.S. schooling. As of 2024, emergent bilingual students comprise approximately 10.6% of public-school enrolment, representing more than 5.3 million students nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). Similar demographic patterns appear in early childhood populations, where dual language learners constitute nearly one-third of young children in the United States (Choi et al., 2024). These shifts reflect structural transformation in the linguistic composition of schooling rather than a marginal demographic change. Despite this growth, bilingual educational provision has not expanded proportionally. Nationwide, 3,649 Dual Language and Immersion programs operate across 44 states, a limited number relative to the size of the multilingual student population (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2025). California provides a particularly illustrative case. Although approximately 19% of K–12 students are classified as English Learners and nearly 40% speak a language other than English at home (California Department of Education, 2025), only about 10% of English Learners were enrolled in bilingual education programs

(García Mathewson, 2024). This demographic–programmatic misalignment reflects continuing structural and ideological constraints rather than a lack of empirical support for bilingual education.

This demographic–programmatic tension is not unique to the United States. Analogous structural tensions between population-level multilingualism and monoglossic schooling norms characterize educational systems across many highly developed economies. In the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Australia, growing immigration-based linguistic diversity has repeatedly exposed the gap between students' home language practices and the language ideologies institutionalized in school systems (Conteh & Meier, 2014; Cummins, 2000). In these contexts, as in the United States, minority home languages are systematically treated as deficits rather than resources, and students face pressures to abandon heritage languages as a condition of academic belonging. Comparable structural tensions are also evident in postcolonial educational systems across Sub-Saharan Africa, where the lingering presence of former colonial languages, typically English or French, as the sole medium of instruction from as early as Grade 1 or Grade 3 renders Indigenous home languages academically invisible and contributes to persistent underachievement among multilingual learners (Benson, 2004; Chibaka, 2018). Scholars have argued that these postcolonial language hierarchies constitute a form of epistemic injustice that mirrors the marginalization experienced by Spanish-speaking students in U.S. dual language contexts (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Namboodiripad et al., 2026). The present study, though grounded in a Southern California context, thus speaks to a broadly shared structural problem: when schooling systematically devalues the linguistic repertoires students bring from home, the consequences for communicative confidence and identity are far-reaching and require targeted programmatic responses.

Policy and ideology

The constrained expansion of bilingual education is rooted in the historical development of assimilation-oriented language policy. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act marked the first formal federal recognition of language minority students, yet while its stated goal was to support English language development, its implementation largely positioned bilingualism as transitional rather than sustaining (García & Sung, 2018). Subsequent policy shifts intensified this orientation. The No Child Left Behind Act redefined success for English Learners in terms of rapid acquisition of English language proficiency based on standardized assessment outcomes (Abedi, 2004), while state-level initiatives such as California's Proposition 227 institutionalized structured English immersion for nearly two decades (Linton, 2007).

These policies did not simply regulate instructional models; they normalized monolingualism as the benchmark of academic legitimacy. Within such a framework, languages are treated as bounded and hierarchically ordered systems, with standardized academic English positioned as the sole legitimate medium of instruction. Bilingualism becomes transitional, valuable only insofar as it accelerates English acquisition. In contrast, heteroglossic orientations conceptualize multilingual repertoires as dynamic, socially embedded resources. Rather than enforcing rigid language separation, heteroglossic frameworks recognize that learning and identity formation are mediated through flexible language practices. The tension between these orientations continues to shape how bilingual programs are implemented and experienced within schools.

The internalization of monoglossic norms by students themselves is an underexamined but consequential outcome of these policy environments. Research on Spanish-speaking Latino/a students in the U.S. consistently documents that English-dominant schooling leads to linguistic insecurity, reduced confidence in using Spanish in academic contexts, and the perception of the home language as appropriate only for domestic or informal domains rather than academic ones (Guardado, 2009; Namboodiripad et al., 2026; Potowski, 2007; Valdés, 2001). Cummins (2000) argued that such language subtractive processes are fundamentally tied to coercive institutional relations of power, which position minority students as deficient and their home languages as impediments to academic achievement. These sociolinguistic dynamics are directly relevant to the present study, which examines these processes within

a population of bilingual children who, despite enrolment in a dual language program, demonstrated widespread internalization of English-dominant norms as baseline.

Bilingual models and outcomes

Instructional models differ in structure but often reflect underlying ideological assumptions. English Immersion programs position English as the exclusive academic language. Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) incorporates the home language temporarily before transitioning students into English-dominant classrooms. In this model, instruction begins primarily in the additional language (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin-Chinese) in the early grades and shifts progressively towards English, so that by fourth grade, students have typically transitioned entirely into English-only instruction (Slavin et al., 2011). Two-way Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs (typically using a 50/50 or 90/10 model) integrate English learners with other English speakers in shared classrooms, with instructions delivered in both languages. Development Bilingual Education (DBE), sometimes referred to as maintenance or late-exit bilingual education, similarly aims to develop and sustain literacy in the home language while building English proficiency, maintaining native language instruction well beyond the early grades. When grounded in heteroglossic principles, both DLI and DBE programs treat students' linguistic repertoires as assets rather than scaffolds.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that well-implemented dual language immersion programs produce academic outcomes that are equal to or superior to those of English-only instructional models. For example, using randomized admission lotteries in Portland Public Schools, Steele et al. (2017) followed seven cohorts of students from kindergarten through middle school and analysed standardized state assessments in English reading, mathematics, and science. Students randomly assigned to dual language immersion programs demonstrated significant gains in English reading, with no negative effects in mathematics or science achievement. Longitudinal analyses have yielded similar conclusions. For example, Valentino and Reardon (2015) examined English learner (EL) students across four instructional models in a large California district—English immersion, transitional bilingual, developmental bilingual, and dual language immersion—and found that students in DLI programs demonstrated strong long-term academic growth through middle school, with mathematics outcomes generally comparable across models. Similarly, Umansky and Reardon (2014) analysed reclassification trajectories, the process by which students are formally assessed and redesignated as proficient in English, enabling transition out of English Learner classification, among Latino EL students in San Francisco and reported that, although students in two-way immersion programs were reclassified at slower rates in the early grades, they attained higher cumulative reclassification rates by secondary school, indicating that English proficiency gains were sustained through upper grades. In addition to evidence from California (Valentino & Reardon, 2015; Umansky & Reardon, 2014) and Oregon (Steele et al., 2017), findings from other state contexts converge on these findings. In Utah, quasi-experimental and matched comparison studies employing propensity score matching documented stronger mathematics growth among DLI students relative to non-immersion peers, particularly between Grades 3 and 4 (Watzinger-Tharp et al., 2018). District-level analyses have further shown that both minority- and majority-language students in two-way immersion programs perform as well as or better than their peers in monolingual settings on standardized assessments (Marian et al., 2013). Finally, large-scale longitudinal analyses in North Carolina districts suggest that immersion participation is associated with reductions in racial achievement gaps among native English speakers (Collier & Thomas, 2017), although these findings are correlational in nature.

The aforementioned findings challenge assumptions that bilingual education compromises English development and instead support additive models of bilingualism. However, most research has focused on standardized achievement and reclassification outcomes, leaving comparatively less attention to the mechanisms through which dual language programming reshapes classroom norms and students' perceptions of linguistic legitimacy. Although broader research on dual language learners suggests

potential advantages in behaviour regulation and interpersonal competence when home languages are supported in educational settings (Halle et al., 2014), direct evidence within K-12 dual immersion models remains limited. In contrast to outcome-centred evaluations, the present study examines these processes at a micro-level by analysing how participation in bilingual arts programming shifts students' beliefs about the academic legitimacy of Spanish and their communicative confidence in school spaces.

Arts, capital, and translanguaging

Arts-integrated bilingual instruction represents one potential context in which communicative legitimacy may be redistributed. Although arts education is formally recognized within federal policy frameworks, it is rarely designed to explicitly support multilingual learners. Yet interdisciplinary research suggests that arts integration supports narrative competence, cognitive flexibility, oral language development, and emotional regulation, domains central to emergent bilingual students' academic success (Catterall, 2009; Deasy, 2002). For multilingual learners, arts-based instruction provides multimodal avenues for demonstrating understanding. Visual representation, storytelling, and performance allow students to externalize complex ideas without relying exclusively on standardized English production. In this way, arts integration can decentralize monolingual verbal fluency as the sole marker of competence.

Research specific to multilingual learners shows that drama arts instruction for English learners increases those students' use of complex academic language relative to conventional instruction, encouraging greater discourse and linguistic risk-taking (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014). Large-scale experimental evidence also reveals that sustained performing-arts participation can improve young English learners' oral language outcomes (Greenfader et al., 2014). More recent case-study research further demonstrates that integrating Spanish into drama-based instruction can increase multilingual students' richness and flexibility of oral expression without diminishing overall participation, suggesting that arts-integrated spaces can legitimize students' full communicative repertoires (Bernstein et al., 2026). Similarly, visual arts integration has been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition and retention when bilingual learners pair image-making with oral and written explanation (Albers & Harste, 2007). Research in dual language bilingual education further indicates that arts-based projects such as collaborative murals, storytelling performances, or even multimodal bookmaking create spaces where students can strengthen and learn to appreciate both languages (Gort & Sembiante, 2014; Johnson et al., 2019).

The Community Cultural Wealth framework offers a lens for analysing this positioning. Rather than framing multilingual students through deficit narratives, this framework recognizes multiple forms of capital, including linguistic, familial, social, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital, that schools often overlook (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and communicative skills developed through multilingualism, including storytelling practices, code-switching, and flexibility in expressions. Within an arts-integrated bilingual program, linguistic capital may be activated when students design visual artworks using personal or cultural themes, then present them bilingually. A student might describe their painting of a family celebration in a mix of Spanish and English, drawing on culturally specific vocabulary (e.g., *quinceañera*, *abuelita*) that would not typically appear in standardized curricula. Familial capital encompasses cultural knowledge and memory transmitted through kinship networks, and home knowledge becomes academic content. For example, a visual arts lesson on portraiture may invite students to create a mixed-media representation of a family member with cultural symbols, and to present that artwork with an oral narrative about a skill or value learned from that person. Social capital is the support and connections students gain through relationships with others. An example would be a structured arts collaboration, such as a group art showcase or peer critique circles that allow students to construct meaning together and build on each other's language use. Translanguaging pedagogy extends these opportunities by encouraging students to draw on their full linguistic resources as they learn, collaborate, and communicate. In doing so, it creates space for the linguistic, familial, and

social capital identified within the Community Cultural Wealth framework to function as assets in classroom learning (Yosso, 2005). Conceptualizing multilingual repertoires as integrated meaning-making systems (García & Wei, 2014), translanguaging allows students to draw on their full linguistic resources during comprehension, collaboration, and production.

In arts-based contexts, students may conceptualize ideas in their home language, develop them visually or performatively, and present their work bilingually or in their second language. For example, students may brainstorm ideas in Spanish, discuss them with peers using a combination of Spanish and English, and ultimately present their artistic work in either language depending on communicative goals and audience needs. Such practices situate language development within culturally meaningful expression and reframe bilingualism as additive and dynamic. By integrating arts-based pedagogy with translanguaging practices, bilingual education can move beyond simply allocating instructional time across languages toward creating learning environments in which students' linguistic and cultural resources are recognized as assets for academic participation. This study builds on that premise by examining bilingual programming not only as an instructional model but as a cultural intervention that may reshape participation norms, expand opportunities for multilingual expression, and strengthen students' perceptions that their home language is valued within academic spaces.

Although dual language immersion programs demonstrate strong academic outcomes, existing research has largely centred on standardized achievement and reclassification rates. Far less attention has been given to how bilingual programming shapes students' communicative confidence, language attitudes, and perceptions of belonging within classroom interaction. In particular, few studies have examined whether arts-integrated bilingual programs function as culture-producing spaces that influence how students perceive the value of their languages and identities in school. Addressing this gap requires empirical attention to students' experiences of bilingual education as both an instructional and social environment.

The current study

Research has documented the cognitive and socioemotional benefits of arts education and the pedagogical value of translanguaging in bilingual contexts, but few empirical studies examine how an arts-integrated bilingual program operationalizes these frameworks simultaneously within elementary school dual-language settings. The present study addresses this gap by examining the implementation and outcomes of *Habla Arte*, a year-long bilingual arts program designed to cultivate linguistic confidence, cultural identity affirmation, and academic participation among Spanish–English bilingual children in Southern California. Specifically, this study investigates whether participation in the program is associated with shifts in students' beliefs about bilingualism, comfort using Spanish in academic settings, and communicative confidence in both artistic and public speaking contexts.

Method

Participants

Participants included 45 Spanish–English bilingual children (23 girls; *M* age = 7.76; range = 5–10) selected from a larger cohort of 135 students participating in a multi-year arts-integrated bilingual project. Students were enrolled in kindergarten through fourth grade and attended two schools and affiliated after-school programs in Southern California. Ten classrooms (20 teachers) participated across sites. Instruction occurred within a dual-language immersion model in which Spanish was the primary instructional language in early grades, with English exposure gradually increasing across grade levels.

Inclusion criteria required enrolment in kindergarten through fourth grade and ongoing exposure to both Spanish and English through school, home, or community contexts. Students represented varied linguistic backgrounds, with some receiving primary Spanish exposure at home and others primarily within school-based programming. Data were collected during the 2023–2024 and 2024–2025 academic years.

Participation was voluntary and uncompensated. The Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine, approved this study. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians prior to participation. Children received an age-appropriate explanation of the study and its procedures, and verbal assent was obtained from all children before participating in any study activities.

Table 1: Participant age by grade

Group	M(SD)
Overall Age (*n* = 45)	7.76 (1.35)
Kindergarten (*n* = 5)	5.40 (.55)
Grade 1 (*n* = 6)	6.33 (.52)
Grade 2 (*n* = 10)	7.40 (.52)
Grade 3 (*n* = 13)	8.31 (.48)
Grade 4 (*n* = 11)	9.27 (.47)

Program description

Habla Arte was developed by a program team of two faculty researchers in collaboration with a bilingual arts specialist in early childhood bilingual instruction and a professional visual arts educator. This program team designed the curriculum, trained instructors, and oversaw implementation. The instructional team, distinct from the program team, consisted of the 20 classroom teachers and after-school instructors drawn from the two participating school sites who delivered the weekly sessions directly to the students. All instructors received orientation training from the program team prior to implementation and participated in monthly check-ins throughout the academic year. The curriculum was informed by translanguaging pedagogy (García & Wei, 2014; Gort & Sembiante, 2014) and the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005).

Instructors delivered visual arts instruction primarily in Spanish and adopted a translanguaging orientation that encouraged—but did not require—Spanish use while permitting fluid movement between Spanish, English, or combinations of both at the student's discretion.

The curriculum was organized around themes grounded in students' lived experiences and community histories, including conceptions of home, cultural icons, family and community, migration, resilience, identity, ancestry, and origin. Rather than treating these as "cultural" in contrast to a presumed non-cultural mainstream, the program positioned all students' backgrounds and traditions as legitimate intellectual and aesthetic resources. Instructors incorporated relevant visual references and facilitated discussions that treated students' home experiences as primary sources of artistic and communicative meaning. Curriculum units were adapted across grade levels (kindergarten through Grade 4) to account for developmental differences in fine motor skill, narrative capacity, and public speaking readiness, while maintaining common thematic threads. Over the course of the year, teachers systematically introduced and reinforced technical skills such as observation, proportion, shading, composition, and perspective. As students progressed, they developed increasingly individualized artistic projects centred on intentional design and personal narrative.

The instructional team dedicated approximately half of each session to structured oral communication practice. Early lessons emphasized foundational presentation skills, including posture, vocal projection, and clarity of explanation. As the program advanced, teachers supported students in elaborating on their

ideas, justifying artistic choices, and responding to audience questions. By the conclusion of the program, students publicly presented original artworks using bilingual modes of communication.

In-person instruction was complemented by Speak Art, a bilingual digital program developed by the program team to extend arts-integrated learning beyond the classroom. On entering the platform, students selected Spanish or English as their language of navigation and then progressed through three thematic modules, each comprising three sequenced lessons that integrated visual arts, creative writing and publish speaking. After each lesson, students uploaded their work and received individualised feedback, in their selected language, from trained volunteer mentors. The platform's structure and the student work submitted through it are described in greater detail in the Results section.

Measures

Pre- and post-program surveys consisting of 10 items each were administered to students and teachers (see Appendix A). The instrument was developed by the research team and reviewed for content validity and clarity by three scholars with expertise in bilingual education. Survey design was informed by established bilingual assessment guidelines. The surveys assessed students' beliefs about bilingualism in academic contexts, communicative confidence in artistic and oral expression, and comfort engaging in bilingual learning environments. Teacher-report items captured observational data related to student engagement, participation, and classroom confidence.

Both student and teacher surveys used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), consistent with the response anchors presented in Appendix A. Internal consistency was assessed separately for the pre- and post- survey administrations using Cronbach's alpha (a) for subscales containing three or more items. For two-item subscales, we evaluated reliability using the Spearman-Brown coefficient. Single-item measures were excluded from internal consistency analysis (See Tables 2 & 3).

Additional data sources

Four additional data sources were collected to contextualize and corroborate the survey findings: student artifacts, informal testimonies, instructor reflective notes and student work submitted through the Speak Art platform. These sources were analysed descriptively and were not included in the statistical analyses.

Student artifacts. Artifacts consisted of the visual artworks (e.g., drawings, paintings, and mixed-media pieces) that students produced during weekly sessions, together with the brief oral and written explanations that accompanied them. Approximately 620+ artifacts were collected from the 45 participants over the academic year. Artifacts were photographed and grouped by points in the year (early, midyear, and late). The research team compared these groups on compositional complexity, background development, range of colour use, narrative elements, and personal or cultural symbolism, and examined how students' accompanying explanations changed over time.

Testimonies. Teacher, staff, student, and parent testimonies were gathered informally rather than through structural interviews. Teachers and school staff responded to brief open-ended written prompts (e.g., fill-in-the-blank items) and shared reflections in conversation with the program team. Student testimonies consist of comments that students made during sessions and presentations, as recorded by instructors. Parent testimony was anecdotal, shared informally with instructors, and limited to a small number of responses. It was not systematically recorded and is reported only as illustrative context.

Instructor reflective notes. As described in the Procedures, instructors kept weekly reflective notes on participation patterns, engagement with Spanish, use of sentence frames, and peer dynamics. These notes were reviewed alongside the artifacts to trace changes in students' oral explanations and independence during presentations.

Speak Art platform. Student artifacts, accompanying written explanations, and mentor feedback uploaded to the Speak Art platform were reviewed to examine the development of students' written and oral expression across modules.

Procedures

Following parental consent and child assent, researchers collected demographic information regarding students' language exposure. Students completed surveys prior to program implementation and again at the end of the academic year. The surveys included Likert-type and categorical items assessing perceptions of bilingualism, communicative confidence, artistic expression, and comfort with bilingual participation. Teachers completed surveys providing observational data on student engagement and classroom participation. All surveys were administered anonymously, with unique, nonidentifying identification codes used to match each student's pre- and post-survey responses while maintaining participant anonymity.

Habla Arte is a year-long, weekly, arts-integrated bilingual intervention, with sessions lasting approximately 60–75 minutes. Each session began with a 10–15-minute opening circle conducted in Spanish, during which students participated in a community-building activity introducing the lesson's thematic focus. Instructors introduced relevant academic Spanish vocabulary to support participation in artistic production and public speaking. They then provided visual arts instruction aligned with a thematically grounded unit and a targeted artistic skill, modelling academic Spanish while encouraging students to articulate their artistic choices. Instruction and demonstrations were delivered primarily in Spanish, and students could participate in Spanish, English, or fluid combinations of both languages according to their comfort level. During the subsequent 20–30 minutes, students created individual artworks while engaging in peer discussion in either language.

During the final 15–20 minutes, students volunteered to deliver a 3–7-minute presentation explaining their artwork. They introduced themselves in either language and responded to a thematic prompt (e.g., describing their artistic choices or challenges encountered), applying the public speaking skills emphasized in the lesson. Instructors initially provided sentence frames and gradually withdrew this support over time. Peers were invited to ask follow-up questions. Instruction began with approximately 90% Spanish and 10% English. As students advanced in grade level (K–4), instructors gradually increased English use; however, Spanish remained the primary language of instruction in kindergarten through second grade. Instructors maintained weekly reflective notes documenting participation patterns, engagement with Spanish, and peer dynamics. They used these reflections to refine lesson structure, reduce public-speaking anxiety, and sustain engagement through interactive vocabulary activities and opportunities for individual interpretation.

Results

The study examined whether participation in Habla Arte was associated with shifts in students' language legitimacy beliefs, bilingual comfort, artistic expression, communication confidence, and identity. Data sources included student surveys, teacher surveys, qualitative analysis of student artifacts, teacher, parent and student testimonies, instructor reflective notes, and a review of student work submitted through the Speak Art digital platform.

Student survey findings

Overall survey responses were averaged across the 10 items. Before participation in the year-long arts program, students' average scores were 2.378 on a 5-point Likert scale, falling between "disagree" and "not sure," and indicating considerable uncertainty regarding the academic legitimacy of Spanish and lower levels of communicative confidence and self-expression. After participating in the program, students' average scores were 4.169, a significant gain $t(44) = 12.558$, $p < .001$, indicating broad

agreement with positive statements about bilingualism, communicative confidence, artistic expression, and participation. Student survey data for the four subsections of the survey are displayed in Table 2. Internal consistency estimates were generally acceptable to excellent for the multi-item student subscales, except for Art and Creativity at post-test. A repeated measures ANOVA to evaluate the subscores indicated a main effect for time, $F(1,44) = 164.199$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons indicate consistent increases across the board, all significant.

Table 2: Student pre-post responses

	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-reliability	Post-reliability
Language learning	2.39	4.20	< .001	.90	.78
Art & Creativity	2.34	4.22	< .001	.88	.18
Speaking & Confidence	2.35	4.07	< .001	.92	.83
Identity & Participation	2.47	4.22	< .001	—	—

Note. Reliability estimates represent Cronbach's α for subscales with three or more items and Spearman-Brown coefficients for two-item subscales. Reliability was not estimated for the single-item Identity and Participation measure.

Student survey data indicated substantial positive shifts across all four subsections. For *Language and Learning*, which assessed perceptions of Spanish as an academically legitimate and valued language (e.g., comfort speaking Spanish at school, valuing bilingual learning, and feeling respected when using Spanish), students demonstrated significant gains from pre- to post-test. At baseline, 78% of students (n= 35) average 3 or below on these items, indicating uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school, whereas at post-test, 80% of students (n = 36) reached the 4-5 range on these items. Similar improvements were observed for *Art and Creativity*, which assessed pride in artwork and the ability to use art to communicate ideas, and for *Speaking and Confidence,* which measured public-speaking comfort, clarity of expression, and bravery in sharing ideas in English or Spanish. On Combined artistic and communicative confidence items (Items 5-9), 80% of students (n = 36) fell within the 1-3 range at baseline, whereas 91% (n = 41) reached the 4-5 range at post-test, indicating increased artistic and communicative confidence. Additionally, 100% (n = 45) of students reported sharing their artwork with an audience. Finally, *Identity and Participation*, anchored by the item "I see myself as an artist and a speaker," also demonstrated significant growth.

Teacher survey findings

Teacher survey data converged with student-reported findings (see Table 3). A paired-samples t-test demonstrated significant increases from pre-test to post-test, $t(19) = 22.438$, $p < .001$, suggesting that students became more engaged participants, more confident communicators, more comfortable using Spanish within academic contexts, and more capable of using art as a vehicle for expression and learning. We examined the four factors of the survey using repeated measures ANOVA. Results indicate a significant effect over time, $F(1, 19) = 512.876$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons indicate significant increases for all four factors at the < .001 level of significance. Teacher survey subscales demonstrated generally low or negative internal consistency.

Table 3: Teacher survey results by subsection

	Pre-test	Post-test	p-value	Pre-reliability	Post-reliability
Student Engagement & Participation	2.87	4.10	< .001	.33	–.39
Communication & Confidence	2.95	4.07	< .001	–.35	–.23
Bilingual Learning Environment	2.98	4.05	< .001	.24	—
Artistic Expression & Academic Growth	2.90	4.03	< .001	–.12	0.6

Note. Reliability estimates represent Cronbach's α for subscales with three or more items and Spearman-Brown coefficients for two-item subscales. Post-test reliability for the Bilingual Learning Environment could not be estimated because one item had no response variability.

For *Student Engagement and Participation* (e.g., active engagement, willingness to participate, sustained focus), gains were significant. Similarly, *Communication and Confidence* (e.g., clarity of expression, presentation confidence, willingness to share work publicly) improved significantly, with teachers noting increased clarity, confidence, and participation. Improvements were also observed in the *Bilingual Learning Environment* factor (e.g., comfort using Spanish in academic settings; bilingual instruction supporting understanding). Teachers reported greater comfort using Spanish beyond the Habla Arte classroom. Finally, *Artistic Expression & Academic Growth* (e.g., using visual art to communicate ideas; improved academic engagement) demonstrated significant gains. On the item "Students' academic engagement has improved over time," 80% of teachers (n= 16 of 20) agreed or strongly agreed at post-test.

Qualitative corroboration and artifact progression

Teacher, parent, and participant testimonies

Qualitative testimonies corroborated the survey findings, particularly regarding growth in confidence and expressive identity. Teachers consistently described a shift from hesitation to self-assured participation. One instructor reflected that at the beginning of the school year, students were "a little bit more shy and scared to show their different artworks," particularly when their drawings differed from peers. Over time, she observed that students became more confident and recognized that "everyone draws differently." Another instructor emphasized the role of bilingual instruction, noting that speaking to students in both Spanish and English "builds confidence."

School leadership similarly highlighted the program's value. An academic program specialist described the opportunity for Spanish enrichment through art as especially beneficial, explaining that access to creative content in Spanish "is a treat for our school and students." Parents and students echoed these observations. One parent shared that her child frequently returned home excited to display his artwork and demonstrated improved fine motor coordination over time. Students' reflections frequently centered on pride and joy. For example, one student stated, "I like Habla Arte because I get to show my mom and dad the drawings that I did," while another explained that presenting artwork made him feel "like a real grownup." These statements suggest that students not only developed technical skills but also internalized a stronger sense of expressive identity and self-efficacy.

Students' perspectives on bilingualism also evolved noticeably throughout the year. Early conversations revealed hesitation; several students initially described Spanish as something used "at home" rather than for "schoolwork." Over time, this boundary was softened as one student who had rarely volunteered in Spanish began presenting fully in Spanish, stating, "Now I know Spanish is for big ideas too." By spring, students no longer treated Spanish as an accessory but as a tool to enhance communication and for deeper analysis, storytelling, and audience connection.

Artifact development

Analysis of student artifacts revealed a clear developmental progression across the academic year. Early artworks primarily reflected guided drawing exercises, simple compositional structures, limited variation in colour choice, and brief, teacher-supported explanations. Students' oral descriptions tended to be short and reliant on prompting. As the year progressed, artifacts demonstrated increased compositional complexity, more intentional colour selection, expanded narrative elements, and stronger evidence of personal symbolism. Oral explanations similarly evolved, with students providing more elaborate descriptions, justifying artistic choices, and independently responding to audience questions. Together, these qualitative patterns align with the quantitative findings and provide converging evidence of growth in artistic confidence, communicative competence, and expressive identity.

Figure 1: Progression of student artwork from early to midyear



Note. Early-year artifacts featured guided drawing exercises and shape-based replication (e.g., a watermelon, pumpkin, house, butterfly, and ladybugs), characterized by centred compositions and minimal or absent backgrounds. Midyear artifacts incorporated backgrounds, personalized details, and greater variation in colour and design.

By late spring, student artifacts demonstrated increased originality, clearer representations of identity and family, and more cohesive narrative development. During presentations, students more consistently articulated their artistic choices, explaining colour selection, character backstories, and how their work connected to the thematic focus. Instructor memos documented reduced reliance on sentence frames and greater spontaneous elaboration, indicating growing independence in oral expression.

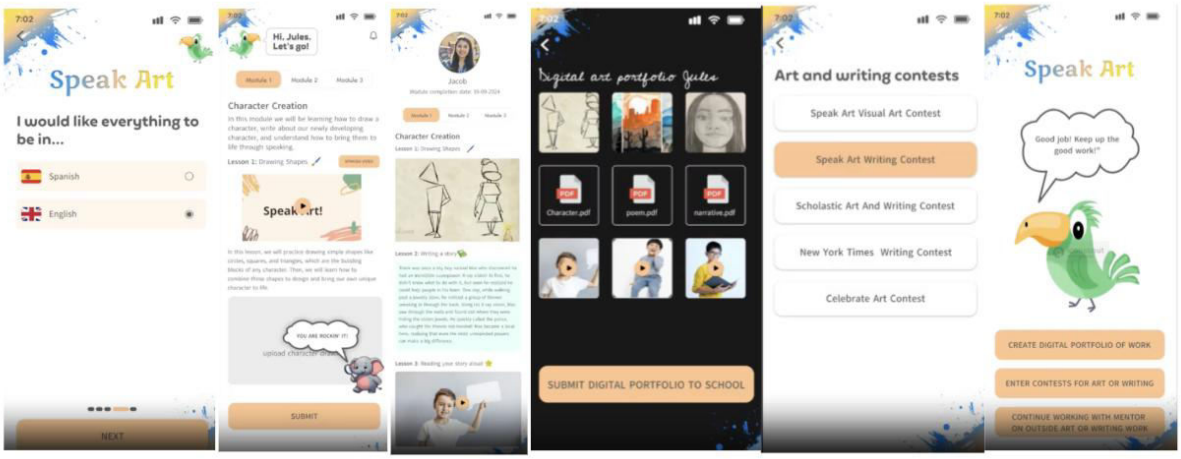
Figure 2: Late-year student self-portrait artifacts illustrate more originality and richer expressive detail.



Digital infrastructure: the Speak Art platform

Habla Arte was supported by a bilingual digital platform, Speak Art, designed to extend arts-integrated bilingual learning beyond the classroom and increase equitable access to structured arts instruction, particularly in contexts where bilingual arts curricula are limited. Upon entering the platform, students selected their preferred instructional language (Spanish or English), positioning both languages as academically legitimate. The platform guided students through three thematic modules, each consisting of three sequenced lessons integrating visual arts, creative writing, and public speaking. For example, in Module 1, students constructed a character using foundational shape-based drawing techniques supported by tutorial videos. They then developed a written narrative about the character and ultimately delivered an oral presentation incorporating narrative elements. This structured progression reinforced the integration of artistic production, written expression, and oral communication within a bilingual framework.

Figure 3: Overview of the Speak Art digital platform



Note. Screenshots illustrate language selection, sequenced multimodal modules, digital portfolio creation, and mentor-supported artifact submission. The names and photographs displayed are placeholders and do not depict study participants.

Upon completing all modules, students could (a) submit a digital portfolio of their work to their school, (b) participate in visual arts and writing competitions, and (c) continue working with a mentor on additional art and writing projects if they chose to pursue further development. Early artifacts submitted through the platform reflected shape-based replication and brief explanations consistent with introductory Module 1 tasks. In contrast, late-year submissions demonstrated greater originality, more developed narrative structure, and increased elaboration in both written and oral components. Students provided longer written explanations and more detailed narrative framing of their artistic choices. The platform's embedded mentor feedback system further supported student development. After each lesson, students uploaded artifacts and received individualized feedback in their selected language from trained volunteer mentors. This iterative feedback loop created a low-stakes digital environment that appeared to reduce anxiety around seeking assistance while promoting revision and refinement. The structured opportunities for feedback and revision may have contributed to observed gains in presentation skills and artistic confidence.

Discussion

This study examined whether a year-long art-integrated bilingual intervention could influence students' perceptions of language legitimacy, communicative confidence, and expressive identity. By integrating visual arts, structured public speaking, translanguaging pedagogy, and a bilingual digital infrastructure, *Habla Arte* positioned Spanish not as ancillary support but as a language of academic production. The findings indicate that participation was associated with substantial shifts across multiple constructs, including perceptions of Spanish as appropriate for classroom use, artistic confidence, public speaking skills, and affirmation of identity. The nearly two-point increase in composite means suggests not only incremental skill development but a broader transformation in how students understood their linguistic authority within academic spaces. More broadly, the findings suggest that language legitimacy is not simply a structural feature of bilingual program designation, but an enacted classroom practice produced through repeated opportunities for multilingual expression, public participation, and social affirmation.

Producing language legitimacy through enacted practice

Students entered the program with evidence of internalized monolingual schooling norms. Baseline survey results showed that 78% (n = 35) of students reported uncertainty or discomfort using Spanish in school contexts, despite enrolment in bilingual settings. This pattern aligns with a substantial body of scholarship documenting how English-dominant institutional norms can persist even within formally designated dual language programs (Gort & Sembiante, 2014; Johnson, García, & Seltzer, 2019; Potowski, 2007). As established in the policy literature above, formal program enrolment is insufficient to shift students' internalized language hierarchies. Lee (2006) found that Latino students in bilingual programs simultaneously valued bilingual education while preferring English-dominant settings. Our base data, showing that 78% of enrolled bilingual students reported discomfort using Spanish in school, replicate this pattern at the elementary level.

The post-program shifts further support this interpretation. Repeated opportunities to create, present, and receive feedback in Spanish appear to have transformed Spanish from a permitted language into an authoritative one. In this sense, *Habla Arte* functioned as a counter structure to English-dominant expectations, affirming that Spanish could serve as a language of instruction, intellectual production, and public expression. These findings extend prior research on dual language immersion, which has primarily emphasized academic achievement (Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Valentino & Reardon, 2015), by demonstrating how arts-integrated bilingual programming may operate as a culture-producing intervention that reshapes everyday participation norms and redefines belonging.

Multimodal arts as a bridge between thought, speech, and identity

The arts-integrated structure provides a plausible mechanism for these shifts. Multimodal production allowed students to externalize ideas visually before articulating them orally, reducing the linguistic vulnerability often associated with academic speech. The progression of artifacts, from early technical replication to later personalization and narrative complexity, suggests that visual composition functioned as a scaffold for increasingly elaborated oral language. Early-year artifacts (e.g., houses, simple animals such as butterflies and ladybugs, and pumpkins for *calabaza en tacha* during Day of the Dead) reflected guided drawing exercises and shape-based replication. Compositions were typically centred, backgrounds were absent or minimally developed, and colour use was limited to one to three colours. Written or oral explanations were brief and descriptive, often limited to naming the object and identifying a single feature the student enjoyed drawing. These artifacts suggest that students were operating within technical instruction and basic representational goals.

By mid-year, artifacts such as ballet folklórico skirts, Central American flags connected to students' heritage, holiday scenes, and traditional foods demonstrated greater narrative framing and cultural symbolism. Students incorporated more detail, for example, layered ruffles and decorative patterns in *folklórico* skirts, a wider range of colours, and more precise linework beyond simple shape replication. Drawings of family meals included environmental elements such as tables, decorations, and surrounding figures, signalling a shift toward storytelling. Students also showed greater awareness of composition across the page rather than concentrating images at the centre. Orally, they began explaining the reasoning behind their choices and what the imagery represented to them.

Late-year portrait artifacts revealed the most substantial transformation. Students incorporated proportion, elements of shading, and backgrounds tied to their identity and community. Several end-of-year portraits showcased decorative framing patterns and colour schemes reflective of their neighbourhoods and cultural traditions. Rather than depicting isolated objects or generic figures, students represented themselves within meaningful cultural and narrative contexts. During presentations, they more frequently referenced family traditions, heritage, and community, speaking in Spanish or fluidly combining Spanish and English.

Rather than substituting for verbal competence, artistic production appeared to support it. Over time, students relied less on sentence frames and demonstrated greater independence and elaboration during presentations, suggesting that visual arts production buttressed linguistic expansion. This pattern aligns with research on visual thinking strategies in Spanish as a foreign language, which has shown that sustained engagement with artwork can lead to increased lexical diversity, more complex interpretative language, and greater confidence in oral expression (López Cuenca, 2021). By enabling students to construct meaning visually before expressing it verbally, the program created a bridge between thought and speech, shifting the burden away from demonstrating competence exclusively through English-dominant discourse norms.

Legitimacy as socially and structurally reinforced

Qualitative evidence indicates that these shifts were socially reinforced rather than individually isolated. Teachers observed movement from hesitancy to confident participation, noting that students who were initially "shy and scared" to present later embraced diverse forms of expression. Program leadership emphasized that the intervention provided a "safe sense of speaking in their native language," fostering creativity and confidence. Such accounts underscore that legitimacy is enacted through peer response, audience validation, and emotional safety, not solely through the formal availability of bilingual programming (Cabrera-Pérez et al., 2023). Parent testimony describing students' excitement in bringing artwork home suggests that affirmation extended beyond the classroom, reinforcing engagement within family spaces, although this evidence is anecdotal and drawn from a small number of informal accounts.

These patterns align with the Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). Gains in Spanish legitimacy reflect strengthened linguistic capital, while artwork drawing from ancestral narratives and cultural histories illustrates the activation of familial and aspirational capital within academic settings. *Habla Arte* did not compartmentalize home language and identity from schooling; it positioned them as central intellectual resources. The program's translanguaging orientation further institutionalized this legitimacy. By permitting fluid movement between Spanish and English during creation and presentation, and by extending bilingual feedback through the Speak Art digital platform, the intervention embedded cultural affirmation into routine instructional practice. Confidence gains may therefore reflect not isolated encouragement but a sustained restructuring of linguistic norms across both classroom and digital spaces.

Habla Arte's translanguaging orientation provides a structural explanation for how legitimacy shifts were sustained. Within the program, students were permitted to use Spanish, English, or fluid combinations of both languages during learning and presentation, consistent with translanguaging as an integrated meaning-making system (García & Wei, 2014). The Speak Art platform extended this structure beyond direct instruction by allowing students to select their language of navigation, progress through sequenced multimodal modules, and receive individualized bilingual feedback from mentors. This iterative feedback loop may help explain why confidence gains appeared durable: cultural affirmation was embedded into routine instructional design rather than delivered sporadically.

Taken together, the findings suggest that arts-integrated bilingual programming may function not merely as enrichment but as a mechanism for renegotiating linguistic hierarchies and participation norms in elementary classrooms. While dual language research has largely emphasized academic outcomes, this study highlights the importance of examining how bilingual environments shape perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and expressive authority. Future research should investigate the durability of these shifts and explore how similar models operate across diverse institutional and sociolinguistic contexts, including minority-serving schools in Europe and Australia, and postcolonial multilingual settings in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the devaluation of home languages in schooling takes structurally comparable forms (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Chibaka, 2018).

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample (n = 45), which constrains the breadth of representation and limits the extent to which findings can be generalized to other bilingual or multilingual contexts. Replication with larger and more diverse samples would strengthen confidence in the patterns observed here. Second, the survey instruments were researcher-developed and designed specifically to capture constructs such as language legitimacy, artistic confidence, and expressive identity within the context of this intervention. While several student subscales demonstrated adequate internal consistency, lower reliability estimates for the teacher subscales and the student Art and Creativity subscale at post-test warrant caution when interpreting composite scores. Although triangulation with teacher survey data, artifact analysis, and parent testimony supports the coherence of the findings, future research should further refine and validate these measures across settings to enhance reliability and comparability and should consider formal validation studies. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported perceptions and qualitative testimony alongside artifact progression. While these sources provide meaningful insight into students' experiences, future work would benefit from incorporating additional observational and discourse-based measures. For example, systematic coding of classroom language use, frequency of Spanish participation in academic talk, or analysis of how newly introduced vocabulary is integrated into public speaking tasks could offer more granular evidence of communicative change. Finally, the study captures shifts within a single academic year. Longitudinal follow-up would allow researchers to examine whether changes in communicative confidence and linguistic legitimacy persist over time and how early expressive growth may relate to later academic development, including literacy outcomes and broader measures of school engagement.

Conclusion

The findings from the *Habla Arte* program suggest that an arts-integrated bilingual environment can meaningfully reshape how students experience language, expression, and belonging within academic spaces. By positioning Spanish at the centre of instruction and creative production, the program repositioned bilingualism from a background characteristic to an intellectual and communicative resource. Students did not simply practice language; they used it to produce, present, and publicly claim ideas. Importantly, shifts were evident not only in students' self-perceptions but also in classroom participation patterns, artistic development, and adult observations across school and home contexts. Together, these patterns indicate that linguistic legitimacy is not guaranteed by bilingual program designation alone. Rather, it is constructed through repeated opportunities for multimodal expression, public affirmation, and structurally supported translanguaging practices.

More broadly, this study challenges a narrow framing of impact in bilingual education research. While standardized academic achievement remains central, communicative norms, expressive authority, and perceptions of legitimacy are equally foundational to equitable schooling. Educational environments that validate students' linguistic and cultural repertoires may shape not only what students learn, but also how they understand their place within institutions of learning. Arts-integrated bilingual programming offers one model for reconsidering how multilingualism is enacted in schools, not as accommodation, but as authorship. As multilingual student populations continue to expand globally, educational systems must move beyond viewing home languages as transitional supports and instead recognize them as legitimate resources for intellectual participation, identity development, and public expression. Expanding the metrics by which bilingual education is evaluated bilingual education to include legitimacy, belonging, and expressive agency may provide a more comprehensive account of what meaningful educational equity entails.

Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Surveys Administered to Teachers and Students (Likert-Scale Measures)

These surveys were designed to measure shifts in language beliefs, bilingual comfort, artistic expression, and communicative confidence.

Likert-scale (1-5)

1= strongly disagree

2= disagree

3= not sure

4= agree

5= strongly agree

Student Pre/Post Survey

Demographics

- Age
- Gender

Grade

- Language spoken at home: English, Spanish, both

Language & Learning

1. I feel okay speaking Spanish at school.
2. I like learning in English and Spanish.
3. Using Spanish helps me learn new things.
4. My teacher and classmates respect me when I speak Spanish.

Art & Creativity

5. I feel proud of my artwork.
6. I can use art to show my ideas or tell a story.

Speaking & Confidence

7. I feel okay talking in front of the class.
8. I can share my ideas, so others understand me.
9. I feel brave sharing my ideas in English or Spanish.

Identity & Participation

10. I see myself as an artist and a speaker.

Post only:

11. Did you share your artwork with an audience?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Teacher Pre/Post Survey

Student Engagement & Participation

1. Students are actively engaged during lessons.
2. Students participate willingly in class discussions and activities.
3. Students demonstrate sustained focus during learning activities.

Communication & Confidence

4. Students express their ideas clearly when speaking.
5. Students show confidence when presenting to peers.
6. Students are willing to share their work publicly.

Bilingual Learning Environment

7. Students feel comfortable using Spanish in academic settings.
8. Bilingual instruction supports students' understanding and participation.

Artistic Expression & Academic Growth

9. Students use visual art to meaningfully communicate ideas.
10. Students' academic engagement has improved over time.

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