



The Impact of Using the First Language in Therapeutic Treatment for Spanish-English Bilingual Clients in the U.S.

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Abstract

Through a comprehensive review of the existing literature, this study explores the impact of using a client's first language in therapy sessions and its importance in the client's healing and sense of identity. This review analyzes the theoretical frameworks of compound, coordinated, and subordinate bilingualism to advocate for therapeutic interventions adapted to the client's language preferences and needs. The findings reveal the intricate interplay between emotional and communicative dynamics within bilingual therapeutic settings, explaining the complexities of bilingualism and its implications for therapy. Additionally, the review addresses the escalating demand for bilingual professionals and the diverse linguistic needs of clients, striving to offer an understanding of bilingual therapeutic strategies. This research contributes to the broader discussion on linguistic diversity in healthcare, highlighting the critical role of language in developing therapeutic outcomes.

Objectives + Implications in Therapy

- **Discuss** the types of bilingualism (compound, coordinated, and subordinate) and the play of aphasia in therapy.
- **Highlight** the decision between using the first or second language and strategies for emotional distancing.
- **Explore** how language choice reflects emotions and identity and impacts memory recall within the therapeutic context.
- **Discuss** the phenomenon of code-switching as a means to modulate intense emotions.
- **Emphasize** the growing need for bilingual therapists in the U.S.
- **Offer** recommendations for bilingual therapists to establish deeper connections and more effective therapy sessions using language.

Recognizing the importance of a client's first language is pivotal in tailoring therapy that deeply connects and heals emotionally. Such linguistic alignment enhances trust and openness between therapists and clients and solidifies their therapeutic relationship—a cornerstone for therapy's success. Moreover, as the U.S. becomes increasingly diverse, the demand for therapists skilled in multiple languages and culturally sensitive approaches grows, ensuring every client feels comprehended and appreciated throughout their therapeutic process.

Key Findings, pt. 1

- Language acts as a way to understand emotional expression and identity better. **(Smith et al., 2023)**.
- The intricacies of bilingualism significantly influence therapeutic processes **(Rastogi et al., 2012)**.
- Different types of bilingualism (compound, coordinated, and subordinate) affect therapeutic approaches. Therapists must adapt their strategies based on the client's type of bilingualism, highlighting the need for tailored interventions **(Fabbro, 2001; Lorenzen & Murray, 2008; Penn & Armstrong, 2016), 2008; Penn & Armstrong, 2016)**.
- Code-switching is a dynamic strategy in therapeutic settings, allowing clients to navigate emotional narratives more effectively and offering therapists insights into their clients' emotional states **(Olivares & Altarriba, 2009)**.

Key Findings, pt. 2

- Culturally competent therapists who understand and integrate language into their interventions can provide more personalized and effective care **(Schwartz et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2009)**.
- Providing mental health services in a client's preferred language improves access and treatment efficacy **(Barrio et al., 2008; Szoke et al., 2020)**.
- The challenge of dealing with bilingual aphasia in therapy is complex, emphasizing the need for culturally adapted therapeutic methods and the potential benefits of alternative forms of therapy **(Schwartz et al., 2010; Penn et al., 2017)**.
- The first language is deeply connected to emotion and identity, often allowing for more authentic emotional expression. Therapists must recognize the profound influence of the client's first language and culture of the native tongue **(Santiago-Rivera et al., 2009; Oliva, 2017)**.

Conclusion + Call to Action:

This paper reveals the critical role of language in therapy, particularly for bilingual Spanish-English speakers, where language serves as a communication tool and a vital medium for emotional expression and identity. It highlights the importance of therapists being culturally competent and attuned to linguistic preferences, emphasizing understanding code-switching as a crucial strategy for managing emotional perspectives. Given the increasing U.S. Hispanic-speaking population and there is consequent demand for capable bilingual therapists and the growing need for enhanced training and awareness of bilingualism among mental health professionals.

So, what can we do?

- Work on developing linguistic and cultural competence training, benefiting professional client interactions.
- Support further research into bilingualism and therapy.
- Recruiting bilingual therapists addresses the language gap and offers representation for more clients and communities.
- Emphasizing the need for cultural humility to enrich therapy and client interactions, encouraging inclusivity, trust, and collaboration.
- Advocating for policies ensuring language access and valuing bilingual professionals can enhance mental health care and recognize bilingualism's benefits.
- Teach professionals how bilingual skills offer competitive advantages in the job market, including increased earnings and broader job opportunities.



"A different language is a different vision of life."

— Federico Fellini,
Italian Filmmaker

