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Between Oral Tradition and Academic Standard: Perceptions of Guaraní Ability and Literacy Amongst Language Learners in Paraguay

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ABSTRACT

Spanish and Guaraní share official status in Paraguay, yet their coexistence in daily life is marked by distinct roles and patterns of use. This study explores how the formal teaching of Guaraní in Paraguayan schools influences learners' perceptions of language ability and literacy. Combining survey data with nine semi-structured interviews, the research adopts a sequential explanatory mixed methods design grounded in interpretivist principles. Findings reveal a tension between participants' everyday use of Guaraní and the standardised version - *Guaraní académico* - encountered in schools. Comparisons to academic norms were connected to lower levels of self-perceived competence, intensified by conceptualisations of Guaraní as a symbol of national identity and the sense of obligation to speak 'correctly'. Although Guaraní literacy was used infrequently outside of the classroom, it was generally valued as complementary to the oral tradition. Desire for language maintenance therefore remains strong, even as the standardisation of Guaraní in education shifts the benchmarks for competence and fluency. This case study is context-specific and not generalisable, aiming instead to shed light on the potential lived impacts of language standardisation. The findings highlight the need for language policy in education to account for locally relevant dimensions of use, and to support culturally embedded forms of fluency. Further research is needed to explore how minority languages can be taught in ways that empower rather than alienate their speakers.

KEYWORDS

Language policy, linguistic identity, language standardisation, multilingualism, literacy

Introduction

With a “uniquely resilient indigenous linguistic character” (Moore, 2023, p.1), Paraguay has two official languages: Spanish and Guaraní, of which some 80% of the population speaks both (López, 2009; Ito, 2012). Guaraní is an indigenous language of the Tupí-Guaraní family, which has survived over 300 years of colonial Spanish rule and subsequent periods of linguistic repression (Moore, 2023).

This paper explores how the teaching of Guaraní in Paraguayan schools impacts perceptions of language ability and literacy amongst learners. The findings are adapted from a broader study which examines the interplay between Spanish, Guaraní and English in the linguistic identities of language students. Here, poignant findings emerged about the distinct and changing role of Guaraní amongst learners. By focusing on perceptions of ability and literacy, this paper showcases the potential impacts of standardising an indigenous language in education and highlights the need for more research on the locally relevant teaching of minority languages.

Language use and attitudes in Paraguay

Although Spanish/Guaraní bilingualism is often idealised as a state of equal competency, contemporary studies note that Spanish increasingly dominates (Mortimer, 2006). This is particularly the case in formal and urban domains, as originally observed by Rubin (1968) and reaffirmed by contemporary studies (Choi, 2005; Brizuela, 2015; Gynan, 2007b). For example, Guaraní is the predominant language in 82.7% of rural homes,

compared with only 45% of urban homes (Choi, 2005, p.233). Increasingly, the country has also seen shifts towards bilingual interactions, where bilingualism in the home rose from 31% to 45.9% between 1968-2005 (Choi, 2005, p.238).

Guaraní was long perceived as the “cause of intellectual dullness” and an impediment to learning Spanish (Choi, 2005, p.237), with speakers pejoratively labelled “guarangos” to denote lack of intelligence (Rubin, 1968, p.46). The remnants of this view have been difficult to shake. For example, Fasoli-Wörmann (2002, in Perez, 2015) notes loyalty towards Guaraní as juxtaposed by a desire to use Spanish in public. This may be broadly connected to the perceived instrumental value of Spanish, with Garcia (2005, in Ito, 2012) finding that even in Guaraní-dominant regions, parents increasingly speak to children in Spanish as preparation for school.

However, the strong nationalistic and emotive function of Guaraní means that statistics and reports of language use may be unable to account for its role in Paraguay (Mortimer, 2006). In Mortimer’s study of educator perspectives, one participant states: “I live in Spanish, but Guaraní comes to me more. It is something important, like mother, love, God” (2006, p.46). Adding to its sentimental value is the notion that Guaraní is a language of intense emotion, with untranslatable concepts (Engelbrecht and Ortiz, 1983).

In addition to spiritual and emotional identities, Guaraní is also connected to national identity. Engelbrecht and Ortiz (1983, p.369) describe Guaraní to have a simultaneously unifying and separatist function, in that speakers of Guaraní are deemed “fellow Paraguayans” and Spanish monolinguals are not. Further cementing Guaraní as a language of patriotism are references to the use of Guaraní during the 1932-1935 Chaco War, spoken for motivation, secret code and warfare strategy (Perez, 2015; Corvalán, 1982). Thus, the association Guaraní with informal domains may have less to do with a lack of prestige and more to do with the intimacy and fervour it carries (Choi, 2005).

‘Jopara’ and ‘Guaraní académico’

Bilingualism in Paraguay is characterised not by a binary division between two languages, but by language mixing in a practice known locally as ‘Jopara’. Following over 500 years of contact, a Guaraní free of Spanish influence has been described as “an illusion” (Stewart, 2017, p.382). Occasionally, scholars report a stigma surrounding Jopara. For example, Mortimer (2016, p.355) describes a common framing of Jopara as “bad Guaraní and bad Spanish”, and Engelbrecht and Ortiz (1983, p. 373) find that many speakers of Jopara consider the language to be “sloppy”. However, there remains a consensus that few people today speak ‘pure’ Guaraní, and that ‘bilingualism’ refers to the parallel use of both languages. There is debate as to whether this constitutes a mixed language, media lingua, or code-switching (Dietrich, 2010).

The linguistic reality of Jopara is not reflected in education policy. Paraguay’s Bilingual Education Plan (1994) assigned schools to either a Guaraní- or Spanish-dominant modality. The policy aimed for first-grade students to begin learning in their stronger language, with teaching gradually balanced across both languages until reaching bilingual instruction in seventh-grade (Mortimer, 2006; Gynan, 2007). Despite this, educational materials and curricula continue to privilege Spanish, whereby teachers receive little preparation in bilingual pedagogy and Guaraní is treated more as a subject than a medium of instruction (López, 2009; Ito, 2012; Mortimer, 2016). As one policymaker observed, despite official policy, “little or nothing has been done” to enforce bilingual instruction (Ito, 2012, p.7).

There is limited evidence on how Guaraní is taught in practice, and inconsistent implementation of policy suggests that provision varies across schools and regions. However, it is apparent that Guaraní is commonly taught as a standalone subject, using a ‘purified’ form of the language in which lexical items for modern concepts have been created from Guaraní roots to avoid using Jopara (Mortimer, 2006; Gynan, 2007; Estigarribia, 2015). These neologisms are referred to as “Guaraní académico” (Mortimer, 2006).

The unfamiliarity of Guaraní académico to the Jopara-speaking population is emphasised by 70.8% of teachers reporting that they would rather use “the Guaraní that is spoken every day” (Gynan, 2007, p.241). Many students consider their Guaraní distinct from “the more genuine” variety used at school (López, 2009, p. 39), where the word “genuine” supports Stewart (2017)’s assertion that neologisms cause confusion about how to define Guaraní. Melià (2001, in Mortimer, 2006), a scholar of Guaraní history, condemns the use of Guaraní académico as a European imposition on the language. In this sense, Guaraní académico “belongs to

no one in particular” and is a language “that no one speaks” (Mortimer, 2006, p.67). This disjuncture calls into question how standardisation affects the linguistic identities of learners.

Guaraní literacy

Just as Guaraní académico is scarcely spoken, Guaraní is scarcely written. Oral traditions mean that most texts in Guaraní are either folkloric or anthropological, and bilingualism is characterised by an absence of Guaraní literacy beyond formal schooling (Stewart, 2017). In line with growing global pressures to record written forms of oral languages (Slaughter, 1997), language planners often adopt “conservative attitudes” toward loanwords and changes in grammar (Dorian, 1994, p. 479). Hence, neologisms such as Guaraní académico become the standard written form. Although some scholars regard the development of a written form as crucial to language maintenance (Trudell, 2006), others consider that the development of writing systems is intertwined with histories of colonialism (De Korne and Weinberg, 2012).

Stewart (2017, p.396), whilst acknowledging that Guaraní literacy would be a form of “vindication and revaluation”, argues that a break with orality would represent a break with a fundamental aspect of speakers’ identities. This is because ‘purifying’ language comes at the cost of the knowledge, experience and linguistic habits of learners, where written formats obscure aspects of spoken tradition (De Korne and Weinberg, 2012; Rice, 2011). For Weth and Juffermans (2018) this stems from the capacity of literacy to create social distinctions, prescribe language norms and become embedded in political power.

For this reason, Correa (2020) questions whether the imposition of literacy can dismantle colonial systems, or whether it simply reconfigures them. Similarly, Fasheh (2003, p.3) critiques the notion that literacy is a basic need and instead considers that “the ability to express one’s living in some form” may not entail reading or writing. Instead, he deems literacy a tool to “control, suppress and distort”, since its enforcement often overrides existing ways of thinking and doing.

Lastly, a portion of scholars report the damaging impacts of literacy on perceptions of language ability. De Korne and Weinberg (2012, p.300) describe a “double-edged sword”, in which they acknowledge the benefits of literacy whilst considering that “learning a purportedly correct way of writing” may deter people from using a language. Dorian (1994) notes this amongst young speakers of Nahuatl, who rarely know the language to a purist standard. When they feel their use of Nahuatl fails to meet academic standards, they revert to speaking Spanish.

Applied to Paraguay, these concerns suggest that the combined instruction of Guaraní literacy and Guaraní académico may influence how speakers conceive of their own linguistic use, habits and abilities.

Summary

The literature reveals a complex sociolinguistic environment in Paraguay, where Guaraní remains symbolically and emotionally powerful, yet faces practical and ideological challenges. The divergence between the everyday, oral use of Jopara and the implementation of Guaraní académico and Guaraní literacy in education raises important questions about linguistic identities. Little academic attention has been paid to how the formal teaching of Guaraní influences learners’ self-perceptions of ability and literacy. This study seeks to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do learners perceive and conceptualise their language ability in Guaraní?
2. How do learners perceive and conceptualise Guaraní literacy?

Method

Sample

The data in this paper is drawn from a case study of an English Language School in a rural town in Eastern Paraguay, with around 7,000 inhabitants. This decision owes to the broader study from which this paper is drawn focusing on English, Spanish and Guaraní, as opposed to solely Guaraní.

The school, known locally as ‘El Instituto’ (‘The Institute’), has been offering free English classes for over twenty years. Students are mixed in terms of age and ability and, since this is not a mainstream school, they may be attending classes alongside formal education, work, or other commitments. ‘Learners’ in this study

are defined as all current or recent students of the institute.

As a white European researcher who is not Paraguayan and does not speak Guaraní, I remained attentive to my outsider status throughout the study. I adopted a reflexive approach, aiming to center participants' lived experiences and interpretations.

Adhering to the Freirean view that the agenda for transformative education should come from local expertise, the imposition of top-down directives was heavily avoided. Instead, research followed the aims of Moore (2023, p. 12) in his studies of Paraguay, theorising about the educational processes occurring and encouraging that more “scholarly attention” be given to this context. This echoes Aveling in recognising that “my understanding of colonialism can only ever be partial” since “I cannot speak about experiences I have not had” (2013, p.210).

Design

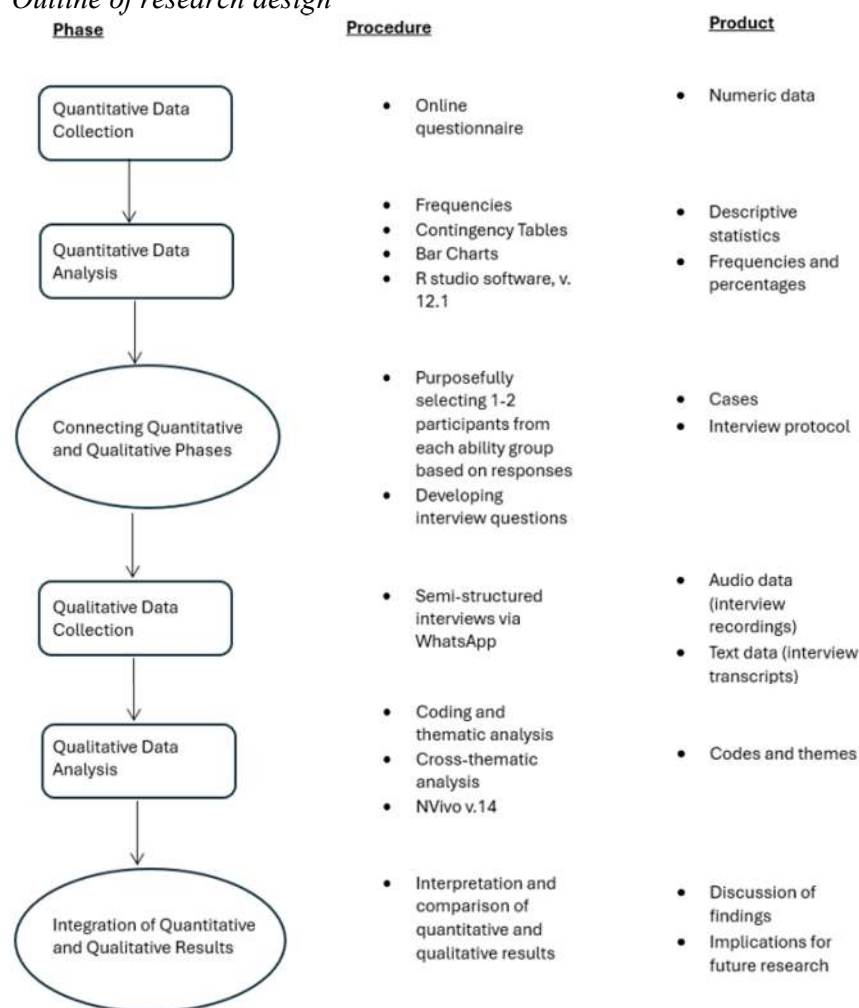
Research followed a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach and combined a survey with semi-structured interviewing. Underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology, analysis focused on the meanings participants ascribed to their social world and avoided making statements independent of this (May, 2011). This approach holds ties to indigenous ontologies, where “reality is not an object but a process of relationships” (Morrison, 2020, p.12). However, since attempts to marry Western-based research with indigenous paradigms can be problematic (Morrison, 2020), this paper seeks instead to acknowledge and incorporate their basic principles.

Though quantitative methodology may appear contradictory to this aim, this phase was used to offer a descriptive account of the sample and root findings in the meanings participants gave their questionnaire responses, rather than using data to make generalisations. Starting research with a questionnaire established “a baseline understanding” of the linguistic attitudes and habits within the case (Toy and Daly Duris, 2022, p.903), allowing for focused interviews to capture the subtleties of language use and identity.

Limited scope and access made it difficult to produce generalisable data. Thus, a Descriptive Case Study design was followed (Yin, 1993, in Bassey, 1999), focusing on the subtlety of a contextually rooted phenomenon. This aligns with the aim to ground findings in participants' lived experiences, recognising the contextual embeddedness of social truths (Bassey, 1999).

Analysis drew on theories of language ideology (Mortimer, 2006; Stewart, 2017) and critical literacy (Freire, 2001; Perry, 2012). These frameworks guided an exploration of how language use and perceptions are shaped not only by personal experience, but also by wider discourses of standardisation, national identity and colonial histories.

Figure 1
Outline of research design



Quantitative Phase

A 24-item questionnaire was answered by 103 respondents, aged between 14-43. Questions explored perceived language competence, frequency of use, perceptions of literacy, language learning experience and motivations across English, Spanish, and Guaraní. The instrument was piloted locally and revised for clarity. To increase internal validity, participants were asked to recall information only from the previous week. Quantitative data was analysed in R Studio (Version 12.1) using primarily descriptive statistics to establish an overview of language use. The aim was not to generalise or draw wider inferences, given the study's epistemological perspective. Instead, conclusions were tentative and explored in detail through their connection to qualitative results.

Qualitative Phase

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of nine questionnaire respondents (Table 1). Since the broader study also pertained to English ability, participants were selected to represent a range of self-perceived language abilities across class levels, grouped according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale of linguistic competence.

Table 1
Interviewee Participant Information

Name	Age	CEFR Level (English)	Average Perceived Competence ¹ Guaraní	Average Perceived Competence Spanish	Average Perceived Competence English	Average Frequency ² Guaraní	Average Frequency Spanish	Average Frequency English
Alex	31	C1	4	5	4	4.75	3.5	2.75
Bianca	27	A2	5	5	3.3	2.75	5	1.25
Carla	16	B1	3	4.6	3.6	3.5	4.25	3
Diana	23	A1	3	4	2	4	4.75	2.5
Eduardo	24	B1	3.6	4.6	3	3.25	4	2.5
Fernando	23	A1	4	4	2	2.75	5	1.5
Gabriela	19	A2	3	4	3	2.5	5	3
Hector	26	B1	4.6	5	4	3.75	5	2.75
Isabel	36	C1	3	5	4	2	5	3.75

Questions explored language learning experience, language use, perceptions of competence and literacy. An open-ended narrative approach encouraged participants to recount personal experiences, aiming to transcend cultural barriers of communication, represent diverse truths and allow the storyteller to retain control (Bobongie, 2017). Interviews began with broad prompts ("Tell me about...") to elicit narratives, followed by exploratory "what," "why," and "how" questions as needed (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Crang and Crook, 1995). Each interview was limited to 45 minutes to maintain engagement and accessibility.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and manually checked for accuracy. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo (v14), identifying key themes and sub-categories grounded in participant narratives. These findings were explored in relation to quantitative results, and the two phases were placed in discussion with one another.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Voluntary informed consent was secured for both questionnaire and interview phases, with participants retaining the right to withdraw at any time. Participant Information Sheets detailed the extent of their anonymity, their right to pull out at any moment, the aims of research, the deletion of recordings and transcripts, and the intended outputs of research.

To mitigate perceived disparities of power, research sought to foster trust and integrity (BERA, 2024). Using WhatsApp to conduct interviews supported this aim, since the platform is used widely and informally in the community. To further mitigate the positional superiority and "power to define" of the researcher (Smith, 2012, p.117), participants were offered access to their interview transcripts and the final research output. Not only did this aim to make research "relevant to our communities and not just to our academics" (Sefa Dei, 2013:31) by engaging participants in the research process, but it further allowed them to point out any cultural or linguistic misinterpretations. In doing so, the study aimed to avoid the "intellectual arrogance" and "paternalistic practices" frequently characterising research about indigenous peoples (Aveling, 2013, p.203-

¹ * 'Average perceived competence' was calculated by finding the mean score across self-rated reading, writing and speaking ability in each language; where 1 = Very Low, 2 = Low, 3 = Average, 4 = High, 5 = Very High

² ** 'Average frequency' was calculated by finding the mean scores across frequency of use with close family, extended family, friends and online in each language; where 1 = Never, 2 = Almost Never, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = With Some Frequency, 5 = Very Frequently

4).

Limitations

Conducting online interviews required reliable internet access, potentially biasing the sample toward those with better connectivity. Occasional connection issues may have affected interview fluidity.

Reliance on teachers for questionnaire distribution limited the ability to monitor response rates directly, despite frequent communication with the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher's inability to speak Guaraní may have prevented access to additional linguistic nuances, pertinent in a study about language use. Nevertheless, research was conducted in Spanish and participants were encouraged, where relevant, to use Guaraní words and offer a rough translation.

The wide age range of participants implies differing educational experiences, owing to shifts in policy and curriculum. Direct comparison of participant attitudes should therefore be treated as tentative.

As a case study situated within a single community, findings are context-specific and not intended for generalisation. Rather, they aim to offer insight into the complex interplay between language teaching, literacy and identity within this multilingual setting.

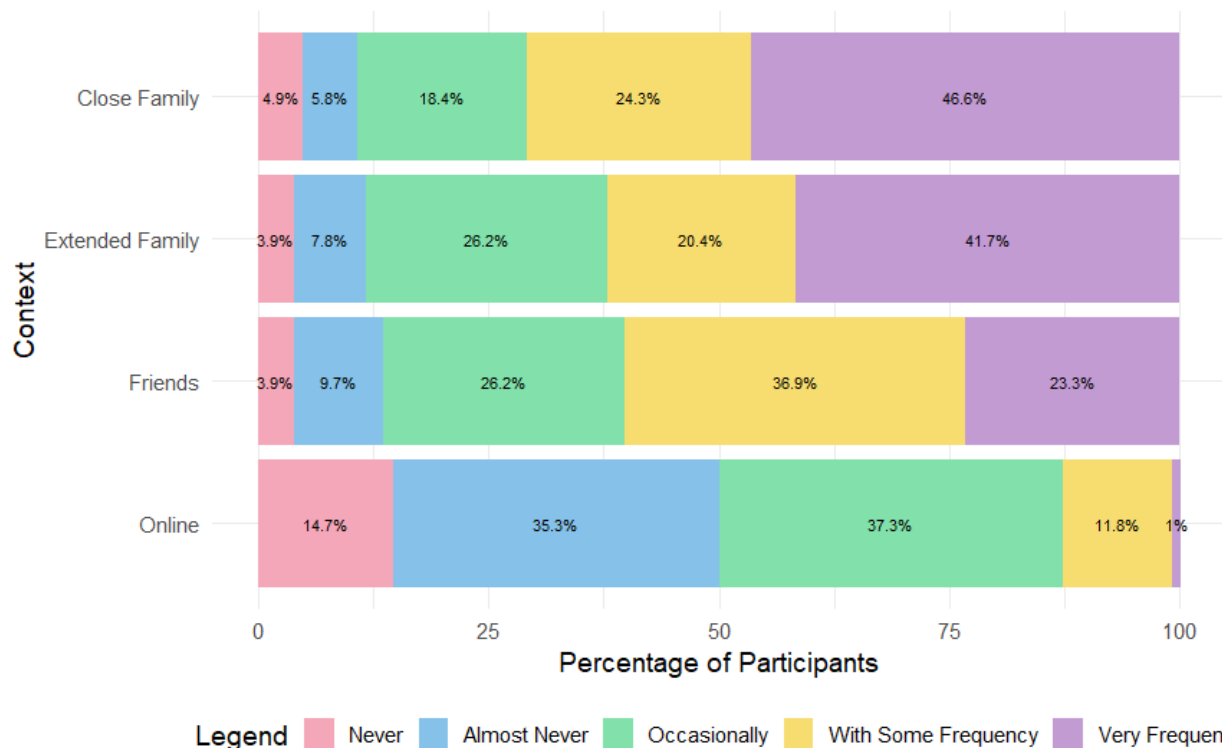
Results and Discussion

Guaraní as a “stronger” language

Central across all reflections on Guaraní was its unique affectual role and prominent use in familial contexts. Where 23.3% of participants reported using Guaraní ‘very frequently’ with friends, this rose to 46.6% for use with close family and 41.7% for use with extended family (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Use of Guaraní



Participants almost unanimously connected their use of Guaraní with family to the “strength” characterising the language. This was deemed to make communication more “fun”, “sentimental” and “rude”, with these adjectives each mentioned by over half of participants. Carla described “an essence that can’t be

compared to other languages”. She noted that the word “friend” in Guaraní roughly translates to “soulmate”, supporting Bianca’s statement that “sentimental words sound stronger”. Multiple participants pointed to a juxtaposition in which Guaraní can be “as sweet as it is aggressive”, emphasising that “when you’re angry in Guaraní, it’s much stronger” (Eduardo).

Here, the concept of “*confianza*” (roughly translating to ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’) arises as a prerequisite for Guaraní communication. Gabriela explained: “if someone speaks to me in Guaraní, I’ll respond in Spanish because I don’t have that ‘*confianza*’ [...] sometimes what you want to say sounds stronger, and maybe the person will be offended”. Alex echoed the potential for offence and informality, but added that “when there’s ‘*confianza*’, I don’t think it matters”.

Though not pertaining directly to the research questions about competence and literacy, this understanding of Guaraní as a “stronger” form of communication appeared so centrally in interviews that it underpins all subsequent exploration of the subject. Furthermore, this builds on the literature suggesting that Guaraní is most frequently spoken among family members or in informal environments (Rubin, 1968; Perez, 2015; Choi, 2005; Brizuela, 2015; Gynan, 2007b) and problematises the notion that this trend is “subordinating Guaraní to Spanish” (López, 2009, p.6). Rather, it indicates that the differing social purposes of each value are due to the fervour, emotion and “*confianza*” associated with Guaraní, and that to assume subordination is to impose a distinct, capitalist value system on understandings of language choice.

RQ1: How do learners perceive and conceptualise their language ability in Guaraní?

Guaraní competence perceived in terms of Guaraní académico

The strength, sentimentality and intimacy with which participants describe Guaraní in their personal lives is contrasted by the distance, rationality and foreignness with which they describe Guaraní in education.

Results support the literature describing Guaraní académico as distinct from commonly spoken Guaraní (Mortimer, 2006, 2016; Gynan, 2007; Stewart, 2017). Despite almost all interviewees using the language daily, competence in Guaraní was frequently connected to schooling, even amongst participants who were no longer in formal education. Over half of interviewees referenced struggling academically in Guaraní, repeating the phrase “*me costaba*” (‘it was difficult for me’). Describing teachers speaking Guaraní académico, Bianca stated that “many times we didn’t understand them”, an experience corroborated by eight interviewees claiming Guaraní académico is rarely used beyond education. Topics such as technology, numbers, months, days, furniture and clothes were listed as vocabulary which is scarcely spoken in day-to-day Guaraní; illustrated by Alex’s statement that “they taught us to count in Guaraní, or how to say the days, the months... all of this we learnt in Guaraní classes, not at home.” Thus, Bianca’s assertion that “if you don’t practice, like with English, you forget” suggests that the presence of Guaraní académico may lead participants to conceptualise competence in terms of a foreign language, rather than a mother tongue.

This was compounded by a general reluctance to speak highly of Guaraní competence across all interviews. The phrases “*me defiendo*” (‘I defend myself’) or “*me salvo*” (‘I save myself’) were repeated frequently, connoting a sense of ‘getting by’. Here, López (2009, p.39)’s indication that many students consider their Guaraní distinct from the “more genuine” variety used in school is brought to life. Participants simultaneously reported using the language, yet not *really* knowing it: for example, Gabriela described Guaraní as “a great conflict” - despite using it to speak with family, “the words don’t come out like they should... but I save myself.” Likewise, although Diana referenced Guaraní as “fundamental in my day-to-day life, because it’s how I communicate with my parents and my grandparents”, she quickly added: “it’s not that I understand Guaraní deeply, I have the basics and Jopara.” This is mirrored by her quantitative responses, where Diana used Guaraní ‘very frequently’ with family but rated her competence ‘moderate’.

Thus, reflections upon one’s own abilities in Guaraní were frequently based on Guaraní académico and the experience of schooling, rather than day-to-day use of the language. The effect appears to be that, since participants feel they do not know ‘everything’ (the vocabulary, grammar or fluidity of speech that is expected in school), they perceive their ability to be lower. The similarity of these experiences across participant age groups supports claims that, despite policy shifts, bilingual education has not been implemented as intended (Mortimer, 2006; Ito, 2012).

Guaraní as a symbol of national identity

A second standard of competence against which participants measured their ability is the concept of national identity, accompanied by omniscient and imagined points of comparison.

Over half of interviewees referenced Guaraní as a source of culture, heritage and Paraguayan identity, through mentions of: “a culture our ancestors left us” (Fernando), a language “of my land, my family” (Isabel), “our patriotic identity” (Carla) and “our roots” (Alex). In addition to repeated use of “our” - signalling both the unity of Paraguayans and the singularity of their national identity - some participants described Guaraní as “a code”. Though Hector and Alex connected this to the use of Guaraní as a military strategy in wartime, Isabel, living in Spain, noted how Guaraní allows her to communicate in privacy with her family, since the language is rarely known outside of Paraguay. In this sense, Guaraní is conceptualised as simultaneously exclusionary (to non-Paraguayans) and inclusionary (through its unifying function amongst Paraguayans). This is in line with literature describing Guaraní as a patriotic symbol (Engelbrecht and Ortiz, 1983; Perez, 2015; Corvalán, 1982), yet the impact that this has on linguistic ability (or perceptions therein) has been scarcely explored.

Findings revealed that this unifying function and national valuation creates a pressure to command the language well. Carla described Guaraní as the “mark of a Paraguayan” and, despite being a frequent user of the language, stated: “I know I have to improve because, being Paraguayan, it’s the official language and I should be able to communicate”. Similarly, Gabriela declared that “if you’re Paraguayan, you have to know Guaraní perfectly... you have to carry it in your blood” and Isabel exclaimed “how embarrassing” when describing her English as “better” than her Guaraní. This reiterates a tension amongst participants who use Guaraní frequently yet feel they do not meet the ‘sufficient’ standards of competence.

This nationalistic role impacts and interacts with experiences of the Guaraní classroom. Gabriela described teacher assumptions that students would have a strong base in Guaraní, whereby “I should know that already”. By contrast, she described English as taught “at my level”, where teachers “understand my situation” and “go at my rhythm”. This not only highlights a contrast in the expectations set in each language classroom but is also compounded by the pressure of social judgement, as Carla concluded: “since all Paraguayans know Guaraní, if you make a mistake, it’s like you’re not Paraguayan.”

This may shed light onto why some other participants, despite quantitatively rating their Guaraní competence higher than or equal to their English, qualitatively described the reverse. For example, Carla reported “a bit more experience” in English, despite using Guaraní ‘quite frequently’ and English ‘occasionally’. Such conceptualisations of linguistic ability can be connected to Dörnyei et al’s “ought-to” self (2006, in Rosiak, 2022, p.28-9), referring to the linguistic attributes one believes they should possess to meet certain expectations and avoid negative consequences (in this case, not being Paraguayan ‘enough’). It appears that the perceived expectations of other, unspecific and unnamed, Paraguayans, lead participants to hold judgements of their own abilities to higher standards. Further research could explore how national identity, combined with Guaraní académico, constructs an “ought-to self” and how this affects linguistic habits.

Summary

References were made - even by the most confident Guaraní speakers - that they did not know “everything”, they lacked vocabulary, or their learning experience was difficult. The consistent rating of competence based on Guaraní académico highlights the role of standardisation and purification in linguistic identities, affirming Stewart (2017)’s statement that the version of language taught in schools will become a national expectation.

This is aptly summarised by Gabriela’s account of feeling “more shame” to make mistakes in Guaraní, leading to “slightly more confidence in English”. Then, she continued that “in not trying to make mistakes, I try not to use [Guaraní]”. Worryingly, this echoes the findings of Dorian (1994), describing speakers of Nahuatl abandoning the language when they feel that their use of it does not meet purist, academic standards. On this basis, would language maintenance be more effectively reached by ensuring that speakers feel comfortable and confident using a language, than by the teaching of ‘perfect’, purist degrees of fluency?

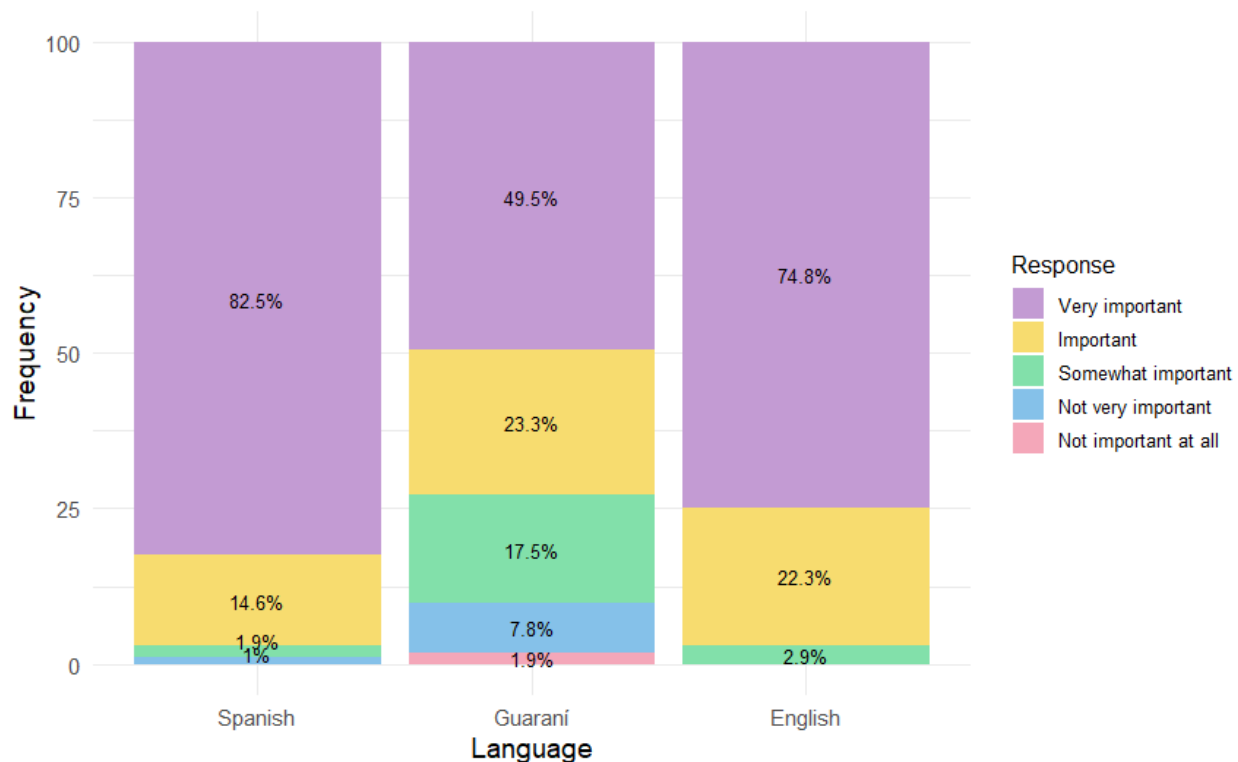
RQ2: How do learners perceive and conceptualise Guaraní literacy?

Infrequent use of Guaraní literacy

Turning to a focus on literacy, quantitative results indicate a bias towards the importance of literacy in Spanish and English, despite more respondents declaring a ‘high’ ability to read and write in Guaraní than in English. 49.5% of respondents deemed Guaraní literacy ‘very important’, compared to 82.5% in Spanish and 74.8% in English (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Perceived importance of Guaraní literacy



Despite this, value was still placed on Guaraní literacy across participants of all self-rated abilities. Participants who rated their Guaraní expression higher were likely to consider Guaraní literacy as important (Table 2). Yet for other levels of Guaraní, such as ‘low’ or ‘average’, results were evenly distributed amongst the various importance levels. So, it should not be interpreted that lower levels of Guaraní mean lower value placed on Guaraní literacy, since 30.8% of those who deemed their ability to express themselves in Guaraní ‘low’ still described literacy in the language as ‘very important’.

Table 2

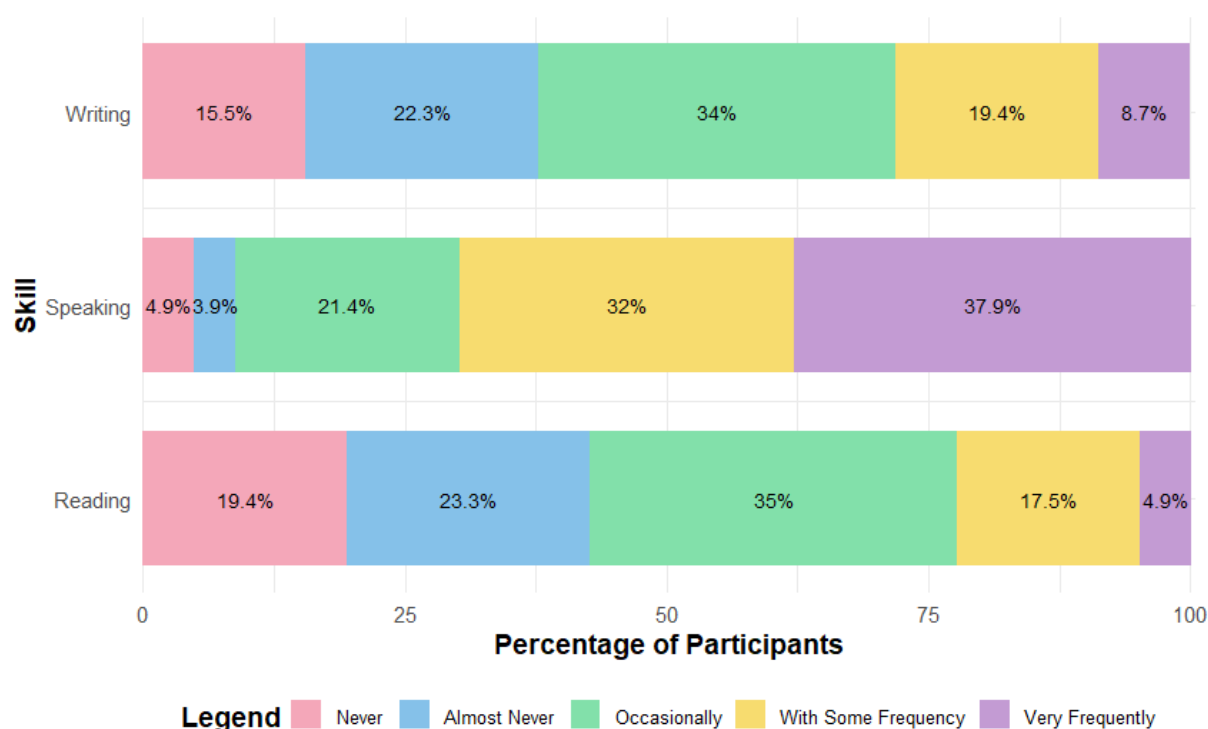
Perceived Guaraní expression (Very low - Very high) and perceived importance of Guaraní (Not important at all - Very important)

	Not important at all	Not very important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
Very low	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)
Low	0 (0%)	4 (30.8%)	4 (30.8%)	1 (7.7%)	4 (30.8%)
Average	0 (0%)	3 (10.7%)	6 (21.4%)	9 (32.1%)	10 (35.7%)

High	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (20.6%)	9 (26.5%)	18 (52.8%)
Very high	1 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.3%)	2 (8.7%)	19 (82.6%)

A minority of participants claimed to read or write ‘very frequently’ in Guaraní (Figure 4). However, responses were relatively evenly distributed amongst the other four response options, ranging from ‘never’ to ‘with some frequency’.

Figure 4
Frequency of writing, speaking and reading in Guaraní



By contrast, Guaraní literacy was qualitatively described as something which is “almost never used...anywhere”, as participants often reiterated that it was rarely used beyond the classroom. Some interviewees connected this to low perceived competence in reading and writing, as highlighted in Hector’s statement that “I’m not at a very good level, because I don’t do it often”. Even Bianca and Alex, frequent Guaraní users, claimed to never use Guaraní literacy. Where Alex said “I don’t remember the last time I read a text in Guaraní”, Bianca affirmed that “all the documents [at work] are in Spanish”. Thus, a perceived lack of confidence in Guaraní reading and writing can be tentatively connected to an infrequency of use.

Though the literature touches on the uses (or lack thereof) of Guaraní literacy, there is little exploration of how speakers perceive the introduction of this written form. That reading and writing in Guaraní are such infrequent acts in the lives of participants contrasts the relative importance that they continued to place on Guaraní literacy. These results therefore beg the question of where, from the perspective of participants, the value of Guaraní literacy is rooted.

Connecting literacy and orality

Participants frequently connected the importance of Guaraní literacy to orality, supporting Lustig’s view that the written word is “a form of storage for oral language” (2002, in Stewart, 2017, p.394). Four participants commented on its function in “speaking” to “campesinos” (people who live rurally), as seen in Eduardo’s claim that Guaraní literacy helps him “when I have conversations... if I go to the countryside and

there's a person who speaks to me in Guaraní". Likewise, Fernando described "areas where they speak lots of Guaraní", in which Guaraní literacy would help him "communicate with older people". Though this speaks to the literature on Guaraní use amongst older generations and in rural areas, it appears contradictory: why would participants need Guaraní literacy to speak to campesinos, particularly in a language dominated by orality?

This reveals two potential trends amongst participants. First, conceptualisations of Guaraní as an oral language remain, since mentions of literacy were made primarily in the context of supporting orality. Second, there may not be a divide, but rather an interplay between orality and literacy.

Almost all participants conceptualised literacy as more difficult than orality, connected to not knowing "enough" vocabulary and echoing earlier descriptions of Guaraní académico. For example, Bianca explained that "when we started to read texts and it was completely in Guaraní, it was a bit complicated... There were many words we didn't know, because we didn't use them". Likewise, Carla described "understanding what you read can be difficult, because of the words; often there are words I don't understand." Multiple participants emphasised the importance of literacy skills for language learning. Isabel mentioned that "because they implemented literacy in Guaraní [in schools], many more people were able to communicate". Her statement connects the teaching of literacy to the maintenance of Guaraní, allowing students to "use what you know from reading or writing whilst you're speaking" (Carla).

Finally, Gabriela took this further, suggesting that she had "more confidence" speaking in English than Guaraní, because she could understand the grammatical structure of her spoken language. Together, these accounts imply that participants are concerned with using language "correctly", where literacy is a means to accomplish this. This not only references the connection between literacy and orality, but reinforces the conceptualisation of competence in terms of schooling and Guaraní académico.

The function of literacy

Here, a sense of critical literacy emerges within participant responses. Since the importance of Guaraní literacy was frequently connected to enhancing spoken proficiency, connections can be drawn with Trudell's view that "literacy in the mother tongue is accompanied by perceptions of improved linguistic competence" (2006, p.626). Desires to improve their own language skills were frequently connected to the national preservation of Guaraní, suggesting that language maintenance is embedded in participants' linguistic attitudes. According to Freire's understanding of critical literacy as a process of connecting the printed word to the social world as a form of empowerment (2001, in Perry, 2012); the process by which participants connected Guaraní literacy to orality indicates a desire to promote competence in a minority language.

This begs the question of whether the existence of a written form inherently implies separation between literacy and orality. Where Gómez (2006, p.122, in Stewart, 2017, p.396) considers that converting Guaraní into a written language would entail "separating the language from its origins", the findings from this study suggest that literacy remains strongly connected to the oral traditions of Guaraní. For participants, Guaraní literacy is not an act of "accessing prestige", as suggested by Gómez, but rather in furthering their oral competence and confidence. These results more closely support the work of Brandt and Clinton, assessing a "complex interrelationship" in which "talking and writing blended together" and "overlap[ped] in form and function" (2002, p.348).

Conclusion

Where the literature revealed that a standardised, written form of Guaraní is scarcely used outside of education, this paper explored how learners in a rural Paraguayan town perceive their Guaraní ability and Guaraní literacy.

Despite frequent use of Guaraní in familial and informal contexts, participants often evaluated their linguistic competence against the more formal, unfamiliar standards encountered in education. This was connected to expressions of doubt and diminished confidence, even amongst frequent speakers of Guaraní. Thus, the teaching of Guaraní académico appeared to shift conceptualisations of Guaraní from a lived, spoken language to one in which 'knowing everything' - in terms of vocabulary, grammar or literacy - is the benchmark for fluency.

The study further highlighted the role of national identity in shaping perceptions of language ability. Where Guaraní was described as a source of cultural pride and collective heritage, this intensified the pressure to speak and write it ‘correctly’. For some learners, this contributed to a reluctance to use the language for fear of making mistakes, echoing broader concerns in the literature about the alienating effects of purist language ideologies.

Despite this, and despite participants reporting limited use of Guaraní literacy outside the classroom, literacy remained strongly connected to the oral traditions of Guaraní. The value of literacy was positioned in relation to enhancing oral communication, supporting language maintenance and reinforcing cultural identity. This problematises the common dichotomy between oral and written traditions, challenging the assumption that low use equates to low value or interest. Perceptions of Guaraní as a language of strength and ‘confianza’, with a primarily oral function, remained prevalent across participant experiences.

More broadly, this study contributes to discussions of language education and linguistic identity by pointing to the inadvertent effect of educational practices on self-perceived competence and language use. The findings reaffirm the importance of promoting minority languages with a context-sensitive approach that is rooted in lived experience, particularly considering growing worldwide tensions between global and local languages.

As a case study rooted in one particular community, these findings are not generalisable to the Paraguayan population. Rather, they offer a context-sensitive account of how language policies and shifting language uses interact with linguistic identities, expectations and conceptualisations. If participants in a small, rural town, where Guaraní continues to be used, are experiencing conflicts in their multilingual identities, then this may reflect broader trends in the changing values, powers, and capitals of languages across the world. This underscores the importance of ensuring that language education is locally relevant, culturally responsive and empowering for speakers.

Further research might explore experiences of learning a mother tongue in school - particularly where this is a minority language or is taught in a purified form - and how this affects learners’ long-term linguistic confidence, language use, and identity formation. Comparative studies across age cohorts, between urban and rural contexts, or involving different languages, may shed further light onto the interplay between official language policy, local linguistic practices and the construction of ‘fluency’ as a concept. Finally, the findings invite a reflection of how language competence is defined and assessed, particularly for minority and indigenous languages whose value may lie not in breadth of vocabulary, but in emotional depth, cultural continuity, and interpersonal resonance.

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