

Creating Bilingual Books to Facilitate Second Language Learning

Morgan Glazer

Kara Harris

Dottie Ost

Mariah Gower

SUNY Buffalo State - Students

Maria Ceprano

SUNY Buffalo State

This article describes a pilot study conducted by teacher candidates (TCs) at an elementary level charter school in Buffalo, New York. The TCs, undergraduate and graduate level college students, enrolled in an English Language Arts/Social Studies methods course block, wrote bilingual English/Spanish information texts and used them in conjunction with a variety of trans-languaging strategies to support Hispanic-American children's acquisition of English while broadening their understanding of grade specific topics in the Social Studies Core Curriculum. Following guided listening and/or reading instruction with the bilingual informational texts, the children were given photocopies of the books for take-home reading practice. A questionnaire was administered post-instruction with the books to examine the efficacy of using the bilingual texts to motivate and increase students' engagement in learning English and gaining knowledge of American culture. Also noted was the extent to which the bilingual books were shared with family members when the books were taken home.

Introduction

For this research project the authors hoped to gain a better understanding of how second language (L2) learners might benefit from reading bilingual books written by teacher candidates (TCs) enrolled in an integrated 9-credit English Language Arts/Social Studies methods course block that was facilitated in conjunction with a field practice component taking place at the school. An assignment for both the undergraduate and graduate level TCs enrolled in the course block was to write an English/Spanish information book on a topic relating to the social studies core curriculum, giving consideration to readability factors impacting the L2 learners for whom the book were being written. The graduate level TCs in the class had the additional assignment of examining the impact of the books on the children for whom the books were being written.

Creating Spanish/English bilingual books was seen as serving a dual purpose. Not only would it provide the Hispanic children at the school with important, readability appropriate information relating to the social studies curriculum for their respective grade levels, it would also expand the teacher candidates awareness of working with an L2 culture as it expanded their own familiarity with the social studies curriculum.

Literature Review

English language acquisition and competency has become an educational priority in today's global community. For general education teachers, it has thus become vital that they develop an awareness of second language students' learning needs and that they possess sensitivity to the challenges of learning an L2 (Harper and de Jong, 2004). As young L2 learners proceed through the grades to high school graduation, they will need to learn academic English (i.e., terminology of specific disciplines, directives for tasks, etc.) in addition to the conversational English used for interacting in and out of school. Oral language develops quickly through social interactions and immersion; however, "academic language proficiency develops at a much slower rate" (de Jong & Harper, 2005, p. 104). Language is complex in both oral and written forms and competence quickly becomes critical for English language learners successful participation, learning, and achievement in the L2. Teachers need to "implement instructional approaches that foster students' development of academic literacy practices" (Ramos, 2014, p. 655) as well as create an environment that fosters dialogue around subject content, ideas, relationships, and questions that seek clarification when there is confusion in the L2 (Hayes & Zacarian, 2010).

Students who have limited vocabularies in either their native language L1 and/or the L2 often struggle to understand grade-level text, particularly informational texts. Reading in an L2 is especially difficult because students must integrate word reading and meaning processing simultaneously (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2010). It is thus felt that reading materials used for L2 instruction should be at the children's independent and/or instructional level. Furthermore, the reading materials should be of interest to the children with the L1 serving as an appropriate scaffold to their understanding of the L2.

According to Harper and de Jong (2004), English language learners from foreign countries can be expected to have schemas that differ from what the author of a text in English

assumes they have. Additionally, some may have gaps in their education, which will impact background knowledge, necessary for academic learning. “Cross linguistic differences at the phrase, sentence, and discourse level” (p.157) can be particularly confusing when translanguaging to make meaning with the text. As has been suggested by Graves, Juel, and Graves (2007) “it may be useful to introduce a strategy in a student’s native language and use it with native language material before helping students transfer its use to English material” (p. 291).

Elley & Mangubhai, (1983) showed that L2 students who participated in frequent lessons using high-interest, illustrated storybooks showed more reading and listening comprehension than those who were taught isolated literacy skills. Welch noted that interactive teaching methods can be effective mechanisms for literacy education with L2 students. Such methods allow students to understand whole concepts that interest them, rather than breaking their education into smaller, less meaningful parts. Results of a 12-month study conducted by Welch, (2015) demonstrated that a teacher who cultivated a “bilingual interaction space” in her classroom, and used teaching methods that went above and beyond traditional single language education were most positive. The students were allowed to convey ideas in both English and Spanish, and the teacher “affirmed her students’ bilingual identity” (Welch, 2015) by highlighting students’ in-school practices as well as their out-of-school experiences. Bearing the above studies in mind, it is felt that guided use of bilingual books that take into consideration L2 learners’ independent/instructional level of difficulty combined with their interest and academic needs are important considerations in planning for instruction. The primary purpose of this pilot study was to examine how TCs consideration of such factors in creating bilingual books for instruction was perceived by L2 learners.

Method

Setting

The setting for this research project was a Buffalo, New York based Charter School where 95% of the students come from families that fall below the poverty line. Given the economic situations of the students, it is possible to assume that children’s books are not easily obtained, and possibly not of the highest priority. Roughly 45 percent of the students at the school are from Hispanic families.

Participants

The convenience sample consisted of fifteen L2 students from grades 2, 5 and 6 all of whom were from Hispanic families in which Spanish was noted as the primary language spoken in their homes - although most of the children noted that English was sometimes used at home as well. The TCs participating were all females and each met with small groups of children from the sample for whom the created a book was appropriate. Each TC conducted a guided listening and reading (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011) of the book. The instructional meeting generally took place during the children's Response to Intervention (RTI) time under the supervision of the English as a New Language (ENL) teacher.

Instrumentation

As noted, a bilingual (English/Spanish) book relevant to the social studies unit plan was developed by each TC, with regard to the grade level in which she was assigned for field practice. Each book related in some way to the New York State Social Studies core curriculum. The TCs had the choice of writing a book that was purely informational in nature, or a narrative that reflected a social studies core curriculum theme for the grade. Illustrations for the book could be obtained either from the web or developed by the TC herself. The TCs were encouraged to consider the language development of children at the grade level to which they were assigned for field practice – a process that necessitated the study of child development and stages of language acquisition.

The process of creating the books involved each TC in:

- Drafting and submitting the English text with illustrations to the instructor for editorial comment.
- Translating the revised text using Google translate, which would also provide a notion of the vocabulary that would be important to introduce when guiding the children's listening and or reading of the text.
- Submitting the book with both the English and translated text to the ENL teacher, who had agreed to work with the TCs to further edit the text for accuracy of Spanish conventions.

- Submitting the final copy of the book to Snapfish, a web-based printing service, for a professional looking publication of the final product. This step was supported through a mini-grant from the Buffalo State Elementary Education and Reading department.
- Making a sufficient number of photocopies of each book so each child had a copy of the text.

The titles of the eight books completed along with the readability/grade level and core curriculum topic it focused on are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Completed Texts

| Bilingual Book Title | Student Author | Appropriate Social Studies Core Curriculum Connection | Grade Level |
|--|-----------------------|--|--------------------|
| What's Around Your Neighborhood. . . ? Qué Hay en Su Vecindario . . . ? | Taylor Parker | My Neighborhood | K |
| Willie the Wolf: The Tale of the Statue of Liberty Willie el Lobo: La Cola de la Estatua de la Libertad | Kara Harris | Symbols of Citizenship | 1st |
| Oh the Places you'll Go in Buffalo Oh los Lugares vas en Buffalo | Pamela Gon | Places in My Community | 1st |
| National Symbols of the United States Símbolos Nacionales de los Estados Unidos | Siobhan Difiglia | Symbols of Citizenship & Civic Life | 2nd |
| A Trip to the Broadway Market Un Viaje al Mercado de Broadway | Kendall Szafnicki | Challenge of Meeting Needs & Wants in our Community | 2nd |
| Buffalo, New York: Then and Now! Buffalo, Nueva York : Antes y ahora! | Morgan Glazer | My Community & Region Today and Yesterday | 2nd |
| Traveling Through Time in Chautauqua County Viaja a Traves Del Tiempo en el Condado de Chautauqua | Dottie Ost | My Community (Challenge of Meeting Needs/Wants) | 3rd-6th |
| Foods from all Over the World Los alimentos de Todo el Mundo | Montaha Uddin | World History Culture | 2nd-6th |
| The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World Las Siete Maravillas del Mundo Antiguo | Maria Gower | World History | 3rd-6th |

In deciding which books to use for the instructional meetings with the children, the TCs needed to consider the readability of the book, whether or not it was a good fit with the independent/instructional level of the children they were meeting, the extent of the scaffolding they would use, and ways for making the text understood. With some groups, more than one book was used for instruction and practice.

With each of the groups, TCs generally conducted an interactive read aloud lesson that was appropriate for the group. The TCs read the English version of the text and the RTI teacher, the same teacher who had edited the books, read it in Spanish. Guided reading and listening

comprehension was fostered by interacting with the students to share the meaning of certain words and phrases in the text (Pinnell, Fountas & Giacobbe, 1998). After the readings, the TCs encouraged the children to take their copies home with them for practice. It was hoped the texts would not only be reread by the children to aid to aid their fluency and comprehension, but also shared with members of their families.

One week after all the books were shared, the TCs followed up with a questionnaire investigating the ins and outs of students' experiences with the books. The older students wrote their answers while the younger ones responded orally to interview questions, with responses being recorded. The questions with possible related probes were:

1. What did you think of the bilingual books you received for reading instruction
2. Did you read any of the books you were given to your family or friends? Who? Did you read it in English or Spanish? How many times?
3. Of the books you received which were you most excited to share with your family? Why?
4. What did your family or friends think of the book? What did they like?
5. Can you think of a family member who would really love one of these books, especially? Why do you think that person would enjoy this book, in particular?
6. How did you feel about the way the books were shared with you in school and at home?
7. Which book did you like the most?
8. Which of the books was most challenging or difficult for you to understand? Why?

Results

Responses were classified according to children's perceived benefit with regard to bilingual literature and their preferences for the books along with the way they were presented to them.

Benefits of Bilingual Literature

Several of the children commented on the necessity of having books that are more accessible to people of different languages. As one student noted: “I read the book that the teacher gave me to my family and my little sister, and they loved the book. My auntie read it in Spanish.” This indicated that providing bilingual book to the students was appreciated by families for whom English is a new language. Another student reported, “My mother is used to speaking Spanish so she would love books with new information in a language she’s used to.” Most of the students told us that they thought their family members would benefit from the books written in both languages. As one student noted, “It’s important to have a book written in English and Spanish because some families speak in Spanish and very little English. What they don’t get in English, they can use the Spanish.” We were glad to see that the students were thinking about the significance of our project and that it impacted some of them on a personal level. The prevalence of similar comments from the group indicated to us their feelings about the need to acknowledge different cultures and languages.

Student Preferences for Books and Presentation Methods

We noted that the students as whole liked first hearing the books read out loud in both English and Spanish before they read them on their own. Read alouds enhanced their comprehension of information and helped them to process the information much more easily. As one of the older students indicated, “I enjoyed (reading in the group) because we all were on the same page and no one was rushed.” Another said, “I liked how the lessons were done. I loved that the teachers read the books out loud in both languages because we could all understand what the book was about.”

There was no one book that the entire group found most favorable or most challenging. The younger children seemed to prefer the books that presented information in the form of narrative, (books by Taylor and Harris) though books with colorful photos seemed favored by all. Two books were noted as a bit difficult to read (books by Defiglia and Ost) though each of these was noted as being favored by family members with one student saying his mother had expressed a desire for visiting Chautauqua after reading the book. Another student displayed a politically positive response, “I can’t say I had a favorite book, I liked them all.”

Discussion

Working on the creation of materials which are supportive to ENL children in areas that are part of the social studies curriculum was satisfying for the TCs in a number of ways. They became aware of the importance of providing materials that are adjusted to specific children's needs in terms of learning academic information, and ways that such materials can be created. Working with children for whom English is a new language, and later interviewing them about the materials provided for an open dialogue about cultural diversity and the way in which language can be used to interact with them in schools.

With regard to researching the impact of bilingual books, the TCs concurred that the small number of students with whom they had a chance to implement the project made generalizations to all ENL learners impossible. Yet the overall positive response to their efforts resulted in their own realization that going the extra mile to support the learning of ENL students was indeed gratifying. They were proud of the books they created and the extent to which they were appreciated regardless of the fluency level of the children in English or Spanish.

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