

Bilingual Literacy Development: Trends and Critical Issues

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Abstract

This article, a literature review of current trends in bi-literacy development and bilingual education examines published research dedicated to exploring the literacy strengths in the primary language that immigrant children bring to the classroom, and the potential of these children for becoming bilingual and bi-literate. The focus of the review is on research concentrated on school children who are developing literacy in two languages or have become literate in Spanish before starting school in an American classroom. The article identifies gaps in the literature and areas that deserve further research.

Keywords: bilingual literacy; bi-literacy development; English learners

This article presents a literature review of research on the development of bi-literacy in school children and examines the current trends on bilingual education. The number of research studies on bilingual literacy and bi-literacy development continues to grow. While some recent investigations build on earlier research, a number of studies explore innovative approaches. We have concentrated on gathering research studies that portrait the major developments in the field published since 1995. The publications reviewed range from large longitudinal studies to qualitative studies involving a small number of English learners. Some published works addressing the views and experiences of recognized experts in the field are also mentioned throughout the article. The authors acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive compilation of the works published on bilingual literacy, but a focused compilation of research covering critical issues on bilingual literacy development. This review was guided by these questions: Does literacy in the primary language stimulate second-language literacy? Which are the best approaches for bi-literacy development?

Does literacy in the primary language stimulate second-language literacy?

In this paper, the term “English learners” refers to children who are learning English as a new language. Statistically, the vast majority of English learners in the United States are Spanish speakers, with roots in Latin America. Manning & Baruth (2009) discussed the dramatic growth of English learners and the impact of this growth in the public schools (p. 172). Data for the school year 2014-15 from the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) reflects the fast growth of English learners. NCELA reports that in 2014-15 there were 4,806,662 English learners enrolled in schools across the country; of those, 3,659,501 English learners have Spanish as their primary language. About 18% of these Spanish speaking English learners are first generation immigrants. NCELA data indicates that the states of

California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois have the highest numbers of Spanish speaking English learners (NCELA, 2017). The number of English learners whose primary language is Spanish continues to grow, and public school classrooms reflect this trend.

Several studies have based their analysis on Krashen's discussion of the major three roles that reading has in language improvement for English learners. Krashen (2005) indicates that "reading in the primary language is of great help in promoting second-language literacy." Krashen points out that "free-reading in the second language makes a strong contribution to advanced second-language development" and concludes that "free reading in the heritage language appears to make a strong contribution to continued heritage-language development" (pp. 66-67).

A number of studies have been published on the challenges faced by monolingual and emergent bilingual immigrant children in U.S. public schools and the approaches to teach language and literacy to English learners (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, E. García, Asato, Gutierrez, Stritikus, & Curry, 2000; G. Garcia & Beltran, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2011). The level of L1 literacy of immigrant children varies depending on multiple factors such as age, years of schooling in L1, quality of the schools, teachers, curriculum, reading comprehension, access to books, and home literacy. They have in common the knowledge of their primary language, and many also possess both some academic skills in L1, and emergent literacy in the first language. Upon entering to school, these children have the potential to become bilingual and bi-literate. However, if the valuable emergent literacy these children possess is not nurtured, or if it is suppressed, they are in danger of both losing their literacy skills in L1 and having many difficulties in acquiring literacy in the new language, L2.

Wong-Fillmore & Valadez (2000) have stated, referring to English learners, that "in order to become true bilinguals these children must hang onto and develop their knowledge of the native language as they acquire English" (p.258, para. 2). These authors warn that "the learning of English all too often means the loss of the L1... For many of them, the price paid for learning English is the mother tongue and their cultural identity" (p.259, para. 1). Cummins (2001) has arrived at a similar conclusion, indicating that many parents do not realize "how quickly children can lose their ability to use their mother tongues" if the primary language is not supported in the school and at home "children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school" (p. 19, para. 2). While immigrant children with a well-established primary language might not completely lose their oral competencies in L1, their academic skills and literacy in L1 will certainly deteriorate if they stop reading and writing in their first language. Thomas & Collier (2011) indicate that research studies have demonstrated that "children whose first language use is stopped or slowed down before age 12 may experience cognitive slowdown; whereas those whose first language is continuously developed through at least age 12 have cognitive advantages" (p. 2, para. 3). In her study of emergent bi-literacy in young children, I. Reyes (2006) found that "when children have access to writing systems and to various literacy activities in both languages, they are more likely to become bi-literate" (p. 289, para. 1).

The primary language is a valuable resource for English learners' development of English language abilities and literacy, as has been demonstrated by numerous research studies. When English learners have already acquired reading and writing skills in their first language (L1), they own a treasure of linguistic resources, cultural strengths, and academic foundations, which should support learning a second-language and the acquisition of English literacy (Cummins 2000, 2001, 2005; Collier & Thomas, 2007; Ernst-Slavit & Mulhern, 2003; Krashen, 1997, 2004, 2005; Thomas & Collier, 1999, 2003; Wong-Fillmore & Valadez, 2000).

The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth concurred with the research we have cited, arriving to the conclusion that literacy in the first-language is correlated to literacy development in English, stating that "there is clear evidence that tapping into first-language literacy can confer advantages to English-language learners... the research indicates that instructional programs work when they provide opportunities for students to develop proficiency in their first language" (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 5, para. 2-5). This national panel of 13 experts worked for 4 years examining hundreds of research studies, under rigorous criteria.

Are schools meeting the needs of English learners?

The literature suggests that the knowledge, skills, and abilities that immigrant children bring to school are in many cases overlooked or considered of no value by the teachers and school administrators. In some instances, the baggage of prior knowledge and L1 literacy is seen as a liability and bilingualism is discouraged (Thomas & Collier, 1999; Cummins, 1996, 2000, 2001; Griego-Jones & Fuller, 2003; Nieto, 2000; M. L. Reyes, 2000). Several recognized authors in the field narrate incidents in which a school teacher has advised Spanish-speaking parents to stop speaking Spanish to their child, so the child could better learn English. These teachers did not consider that if the parents did not speak to their children in Spanish, which was the only language they could use fluently, the parents' communication with the child would be broken. Several researchers have found that these situations continue to occur in our public schools. Nieto & Bode (2010) stated that "...it is common practice in schools to try to convince parents whose native language is other than English that they should speak only English with their children" (p. 403, para. 3). Nieto (2000) discusses the results of a countrywide survey, conducted by the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), which found that "serious disruptions of family relations occurred when young children learned English in school and lost their native language" (p. 202, para 3, citing NABE News). When the home language is not valued in the school, some children become reluctant to continue using their primary language. As we have noted elsewhere, this language loss can have far-reaching negative effects as the internal communication and relationships within the family are disrupted.

An important factor to consider is the vast cultural heritage and values that are part of the identities of immigrant children and their families, which on many occasions are disregarded by schools and teachers. Wong-Fillmore & Valadez (2000) have emphasized that these students and their families "have enormous cultural resources and talent to contribute to their adopted society" (p.259, para. 1). While relating her childhood experiences, Nieto (2000) recalls the low

expectations of some of her teachers and how she encountered stereotypes that fostered the notion that the Spanish language and culture were substandard. “I assumed, as many of my peers did, that there was something wrong with us. We learned to feel ashamed of who we were, how we spoke, what we ate, and everything else that was different about us” (p. 1, para. 3). According to E. Garcia (2002) “The assumptions a teacher makes about the student’s culture, whether right or wrong, may stereotype the student and thus preclude the flexible, realistic, and open-minded teacher-student interaction needed for effective instruction” (p. 76, para. 1).

Research shows that there are erroneous notions about literacy development ingrained in the minds of some educators. English learners who can read with fluency in Spanish are sometimes discouraged by teachers of continuing reading in their primary language due to mistaken notions that reading in Spanish will prevent them from learning to read in English. Cummins (2005) discusses the existing misconceptions about language development and how these mistaken views have impacted the teaching of reading and the instruction of English learners. The authors of this article have encountered teachers totally convinced that English learners should not read in their primary language. Parents of English learners have told us that school personnel have advised them not to let their children read anything in Spanish. One, for example, recounted her experience with her daughter’s teacher as follows: “*A Elenita le encanta leer, se pasaba la tarde leyendo. Le escondí los libros que trajimos de México, la maestra me dijo que si sigue leyendo en español no va a aprender inglés.*” (“Elenita loves reading; she used to spend the whole afternoon reading. I had to hide the books we brought from Mexico; her teacher told me that if she continues reading in Spanish she will not learn English”). [Personal communication].

Research studies indicate that conversations like the one above are, unfortunately, frequent. Parents of English learners want the best for their children: they want their children to learn English, and in most cases they believe that the teacher is the expert in language learning. Teacher preparation programs thus have the responsibility to ensure that every teacher candidate understands how languages are learned. Teachers need to be aware that reading skills transfer across languages. Sometimes schools tend to focus on remediation of English learners and assess them from a “deficit perspective” instead of valuing the richness of their primary language, cultural strengths, and the knowledge they have previously acquired, forgetting that “these students often arrive with a wealth of life experiences, including age-appropriate thinking, richly expressed in primary language” (Thomas & Collier, 1999, p. 46, para. 3). Soltero-González, Escamilla & Hopewell (2012) propose a holistic bilingual approach in order to properly assess the writing skills of emerging bilingual children. The authors point out the need for modifying teachers’ perceptions about bi-literacy.

Curriculum & Instruction that Supports Bi-literacy

There is abundant research indicating the positive effects of the continuous development of the primary languages of English learners as they are in the process of learning English as a new language (Collier & Thomas, 2007; Goldenberg, 2008, 2013; Krashen, 1997; I. Reyes,

2006). Krashen (1997) asserts that when English learners receive quality education in L1, schools are providing these children with content knowledge and literacy skills. “The knowledge that children get through their first language helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. Literacy developed in the primary language transfers to the second language” (Krashen, 1997, p. 2, para 1). Other researchers arrived to similar conclusions; Collier and Thomas (2007) have pointed out that, for English learners in the primary grades, the linguistic gains in the first language transfer to the second language and the content knowledge acquired through L1 becomes a knowledge base that will support academic development in L2. Collier and Thomas stress that “When schooling is provided in both L1 and L2, both languages are the vehicle for strong cognitive and academic development” (p. 341, para. 1). English learners can use their literacy skills in the Spanish language to understand features of the English language.

Cummins (2005) asserts that there are “many possibilities for cross-linguistic language exploration” and indicates that “The Latin or Greek origins of academic vocabulary in English also means that there are many cognates between this vocabulary and the vocabulary of Spanish and other Romance languages” (p.24, para. 4). Cummins refers to Coxhead (2000) who had recommended the study of prefixes, suffixes and stems for learning academic vocabulary, given that more than 82% of academic words used in English come from the Greek or Latin (p.24). The academic repertoire of words that immigrant English learners might already know and be able to recognize is an important source for expanding their content knowledge and learning English. Research demonstrates the importance of helping students make cross-language connections (Soltero-González, Sparrow, Butvilofsky, Escamilla, & Hopewell, 2016; Sparrow, Butvilofsky, Escamilla, Hopewell & Tolento, 2014).

Wong-Fillmore & Valadez (2000) believe that bilingual education “offers children a chance to become bilingual without giving up their cultural identities... and to enjoy the social and cognitive benefits that bilingualism offers to individuals” (p. 258, para. 2). Cummins (2001) concurs on the advantages of bilingualism stating: “Bilingualism has positive effects on children’s linguistic and educational development” (p. 17, para 4). Bilingualism is an asset and should be valued by teachers and schools. Proficiency in the primary language is a key factor that supports the development of literacy skills in a new language. English learners should be encouraged to build upon the skills they have in their primary language. If these English learners keep increasing their primary language literacy as they develop academic language proficiency in English, they have the possibility of becoming bilingual and bi-literate (Dworin, 2003; G. Garcia & Beltran, 2005; Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014).

When a child enjoys reading and is engaged in voluntary and self-selected free reading, the child has a valuable resource for academic achievement. Immigrant children who are avid readers have in their books a link to their roots, culture, family and friends left behind. Literature in the primary language should be encouraged and facilitated for these children. According to Krashen (1997), reading in one language will support learning to read in the second language “Children who arrive with a good education in their primary language have already gained two

of the three objectives of a good bilingual education program -- literacy and subject matter knowledge” (p. 3, para 2).

G. Garcia & Beltran (2005) point out that the primary language “permits children to use their full language repertoire to help them acquire a second language” and there is evidence that “conceptual understanding is greatly enhanced when supported by the child’s primary language; this language link to the home provides a comfort zone” that can help students achieve success (p. 215, para. 3).

Many English learners will become “Sequential Bilinguals,” as defined by Trumbull & Pacheco (2005): “Sequential Bilingual - A person who has learned a second language after the first language is established” (p.71, para. 1). The ideal would be that they also become bi-literate. Researchers agree that: “if children continue to have access to and opportunities to function in both languages and writing systems, they will be more likely to maintain and continue to develop their bilingualism and bi-literacy” (I. Reyes, 2006, p. 289, para. 1). Nevertheless, as Krashen (1997) determined, English learners do not always have access to reading and educational materials in both languages. In many instances, the school environment and learning resources available exclude the culture and language of the child’s home. English learners who learn to read in both L1 and L2 develop important skills that provide the foundations of academic success. Research supports the importance of bilingual academic language development for these children (Cummins, 2000, 2001, 2005; Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014).

When English learners have the opportunity of developing literacy skills in both languages their academic potential increases. If a child has developed literacy skills in Spanish and is involved in self-selected reading of newspapers, magazines, comic books, fiction, stories and books in Spanish; these reading activities should not be discouraged (Krashen, 1997, 2004; Krashen & Mason, 2015). The enjoyment of reading in one language will transfer to the new language. Exposure to interesting reading material in both languages supports bilingual literacy development. In other words, literacy activities in the primary language will support learning English and the development of academic language skills when English learners start school in the United States.

Ernst-Slavit & Mulhern (2003) support the use of bilingual books for fostering bilingual literacy. Bilingual books are particularly useful for English learners and sequential bilingual children. The availability of bilingual resources and bilingual books continues to increase. There are a number of publishers dedicated to produce culturally relevant bilingual literature for children that genuinely portray the Latino culture. There is a comprehensive range of bilingual literature for different age levels and about countless topics. As English learners gain literacy skills in their new language, they should be able to enjoy reading books in both their first and second language. English learners should have access to a variety of high quality and interesting literature in both L1 and L2; if they find pleasure in reading, they will have more chances of succeeding in school. Reading is central to increasing school achievement and test scores in every subject. Krashen (1997) emphasizes the importance of the availability of literary resources

in the school and at home. He has stated that the main problem with bilingual education “is the absence of books--in both the first and second languages -- in the lives of students in these programs” (Krashen, 1997, p. 4, para 5). The availability of books in L1, L2, and bilingual books enables voluntary reading. “Free voluntary reading can help all components of bilingual education: It can be a source of comprehensible input in English or a means for developing knowledge and literacy through the first language, and for continuing first language development” (Krashen, 1997, p. 5 para. 1).

Cummins (2001) has highlighted the benefits of dual language acquisition indicating that elementary school children who develop literacy in more than one language obtain “deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality” (Cummins, 2001, p. 17, para. 5). Other experts agree: “proficient bilinguals (who develop written as well as oral proficiency in both languages) outscore monolinguals on many types of measures-especially in measures of creativity and problem-solving” (Thomas & Collier, 2011, p. 2, para. 3).

Models of Instruction for Bi-literacy Development

A wide range of instructional models and strategies there have been implemented to instruct English learners and this is reflected in the research studies reviewed. Among the pedagogical methodologies with documented success are the dual language bilingual approaches and the paired literacy instructional models. In a dual language program, English learners are taught in academic content in both L1 and L2. Dual language programs can be implemented either as a one-way or a two-way program, depending on the demographics. In the one-way model, most of the students are English learners whereas in the two-way model, native speakers of Spanish and native speakers of English are instructed together in both languages. Most of the dual language programs use Spanish and English, given that the majority of English learners in the U.S. have Spanish as their L1 language (NCELA, 2017), but there are dual language programs that pair English with another language, such as Vietnamese, Mandarin, Arabic, French, or others. In classrooms with multiple languages dual language programs are not feasible. This review is focused on bilingual Spanish-English programs.

Thomas & Collier (2011) determined that dual language programs are effective for English learners and that these programs are able to close the achievement gap of English learners faster than other instructional approaches: “current strategies that close the gap in the shortest amount of time possible are found in dual language programs, in which English learners are receiving the curriculum at least half of the instructional time through their mother tongue and the other half in English” (p. 1, para. 3). School children who are literate in Spanish when entering an American school will benefit from a dual language program; they can continue developing their primary language in school, and use their first language as a foundation for becoming literate in English. Sleeter & Grant (2009) assert that dual language programs

“promote full academic competence in two languages among both immigrant and native-English speaking students” (p. 29, para 2).

Dual language programs give students the opportunity to become bilingual, bi-literate, and develop bi-cultural competences. Numerous research studies demonstrate that dual language programs are ideal for immigrant elementary school children who have achieved basic literacy in Spanish and have learned to read and write in their primary language before entering school in the United States. These children can continue acquiring content knowledge in their primary language and reading for academic purposes and for pleasure while learning English as a new language (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008; Collier & Thomas, 2007; Kibler, Salerno, & Hardigree, 2014; Lindholm-Leary, 2012; Thomas & Collier, 2003).

Research by Thomas & Collier (2003) reveals that in a dual language classroom “English learners have an opportunity to make faster-than-average progress on grade-level instruction that is not watered down” (p. 61, para. 2). Thomas & Collier have studied the effects of dual language programs for years and have asserted that English learners are better served by the dual bilingual education model. Research has demonstrated that in well implemented dual language programs children can reach high academic achievement in both languages (Thomas & Collier, 1999, pp. 46- 47).

Several research studies have examined the effectiveness of paired literacy models which deliver literacy instruction in Spanish and English; with an emphasis in the importance of cross-language connections and high quality literacy instruction in both languages. Results of longitudinal research studies using the paired literacy model “*Literacy Squared*” support the benefits of simultaneous literacy development, reading and writing, in both languages (Soltero-González, et al., 2016; Sparrow, et al., 2014). The benefits of metalinguistic awareness have demonstrated in a number of research studies. Beeman & Urow (2013, 2017) have studied the implementation of “*The Bridge*” approach in which the teacher helps students recognize the differences and similarities between L1 and L2 and to understand the metalinguistic connections. Several studies denote the need of appropriate bilingual assessment for English learners. Researchers indicate that the development of bilingual assessment instruments is crucial in the classroom and for further research purposes (Soltero-González, et al., 2012; Sparrow, et al., 2014).

The National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, after a rigorous research examination, found that “studies that compare bilingual instruction with English-only instruction demonstrate that language-minority students instructed in their native language as well as in English perform better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than language-minority students instructed only in English” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 5, para. 5). Following the publication of the findings of the *National Literacy Panel*, experts in the field analyzed the panel’s conclusions and recommendations. Goldenberg (2008) remarked that the national panel was “the latest of five meta-analyses that reached the same conclusion: learning to read in the home language promotes reading achievement in the second language” (p. 15, para. 2). Other researchers questioned if educational policies that prevent English learners to become

bi-literate would change. “Given this knowledge, will federal/state/local policies encourage the implementation and study of multiple approaches to the education of language minority students? Or will we continue to see the current trend toward policy initiatives that privilege and mandate monolingual approaches?” were some of the questions raised by Escamilla, (2009) in her review of the findings of the national panel (p. 451, para. 3). Experts in the field have pointed out that the research findings were conclusive and that policy and practice should be guided by the research evidence, but research demonstrate that this is not always the case. Goldenberg (2008) expressed the concern that despite the conclusive results of five different meta-analyses, educational policies in several states disregard the scientific evidence. The use of the first language continues to be avoided in many classrooms and English learners do not always receive the instructional modifications needed.

Trends and Further Study

The literature reviewed demonstrates the many complexities and paradigms in bilingual education. Researchers in the field continue to seek better approaches for bi-literacy development, the research reviewed exhibits some consistent findings on “best practices” in bilingual education. A major premise found in the literature is that the transfer of literacy skills from one language to another language occurs, so that literacy in both L1 and L2 should be supported and encouraged. It is widely recognized in the literature that bilingual literacy is an advantage and that there are many life-long benefits in becoming bilingual and bi-literate. A bicultural curriculum that supports bilingualism and bi-literacy requires culturally competent teachers able to help children make cross-language connections; these teachers must understand bi-literacy development and bilingual assessment (Collier & Thomas, 2007; Cortina, Makar, & Mount-Cors, 2015; Kibler, Salerno, & Hardigree, 2014; Soltero-González, et al., 2016; Sparrow, et al., 2014; Thomas & Collier, 1999, 2003).

Our review elucidates that the study of bi-literacy development is an evolving field. There is a growing body of literature concerned with the implementation of bilingual pedagogical approaches that provide connections across the languages and appropriate assessment practices for English learners. Likewise, there is an enormous need for further research studies, quantitative and qualitative, in the field of bilingual education, bi-literacy development, and related areas. Additional research is needed on the preparation of effective teachers for English learners, especially of teachers with the knowledge and skills to teach in dual language classrooms, able to provide metalinguistic awareness and assessment in both languages. As a final point, perhaps one of the most crucial issues is that educational policies at state and national levels must be influenced by the research findings.

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