

# ***Pedagogical Practices Revisited: The Science of Reading and Culturally Sustaining Early Literacy for Multilingual Learners***

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## **Abstract**

*As Texas schools become increasingly diverse, educators are presented with opportunities to build on students' linguistic strengths and engage in transformative literacy teaching. Culturally sustaining early literacy instruction provides an avenue for teachers to support multilingual learners by leveraging their linguistic and cultural experiences as assets in reading development. This paper is organized into two sections: (1) an overview of culturally sustaining early literacy instruction and the contributions and limitations of the knowledge base associated with the Science of Reading (SOR), relating to multilingual learners; and (2) a description of three instructional strategies that support multilingual learners. The authors aim to disseminate this information to educators spanning K-16, fostering awareness of practices that educators can revisit and reassess as they tailor their instruction for multilingual students.*

**Keywords:** early literacy, Science of Reading, culturally sustaining pedagogies, multilingual learners

The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) released a report highlighting the increase of multilingual learners in public schools in the United States. The results showed an increase between 2010 and 2020, with Texas experiencing a 20% rise, the highest of any state. This upward trend of multilingual learners has transformed the educational landscape, fostering significant diversity in schools (NCES, 2023). This diversity presents educators with opportunities to embrace and incorporate the rich linguistic, cultural, and literate experiences children bring into schools. Despite these shifting demographics, the pedagogy guiding literacy curricula remains unchanged (Machado, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017). Current research emphasizes culturally sustaining pedagogy in early literacy instruction as a critical component for meeting the instructional needs of multilingual learners (Byrnes-Cloet & Hill, 2022; Nogueroń-Liu, 2020; Share, 2021). Literacy practices that aim to support multilingual students must be incorporated into reading curricula, assessments, and teacher decisions (Nogueroń-Liu, 2020).

Our purpose is to expand monolingual perspectives toward an asset-based framework that is inclusive of multilingual learners while considering Science of Reading (SOR) research. This paper revisits early literacy practices within this context and supports educators with concrete teaching practices aligning with SOR to support curriculum development. Drawing from our backgrounds as former K-6 educators, school leaders, and current doctoral students we have been inspired to respond to the growing knowledge surrounding SOR (Goldenberg, 2020; Castles, 2018) while maintaining a focus on multilingual students. We use the term “multilingual learners” to refer to all children whose language practices are diverse, including emergent bilinguals (children who are learning a second language in addition to their home language), bilinguals (children who are already fluent in two languages), and children who speak more than two languages or language varieties. All of these children can benefit from

learning experiences that position linguistic diversity as an asset.

This paper is organized into two sections. First, we summarize research on culturally sustaining early literacy instruction and the contributions and limitations of the knowledge base associated with SOR, with a focus on multilingual learners. Second, we describe three instructional strategies that support multilingual learners. Our goal is to disseminate this information to educators spanning K-16, fostering awareness of practices that educators can revisit or reassess as they tailor their instruction for multilingual students.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and the Science of Reading**

Almost a decade ago, Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (2014) advanced culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) by introducing culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP), emphasizing the need for educators to move away from teaching approaches that prioritize White, middle-class, monolingual, and monocultural education. More recently, developments in SOR acknowledge the limitations of monolingual research, emphasizing the need to recognize global linguistic diversity in varied literacies (Share, 2021). Within these contexts, educators and administrators face the realization that standardized academic success metrics are aligned with English-speaking students (Dyson & Genishi, 2009). Multilingual education scholars urge literacy educators and researchers to reassess research on foundational reading skills with multilingual students (Martinez & Mejía, 2020; Nogueroń-Liu, 2020).

As Texas schools become increasingly diverse, it is crucial for teachers to continuously educate themselves on the evolving knowledge in CSP and SOR and create pathways toward culturally sustaining and research-supported literacy education. Research in CSP has generated promising studies on culturally sustaining early

literacy instruction, which can support the teaching of foundational literacy skills for linguistically diverse students (Dunham et al., 2022). This research explores methods by which educators can empower young learners by valuing their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Machado, 2017).

While SOR research acknowledges cultural relevance, there remains a gap in how teachers implement early literacy instruction for multilingual students in this context while maintaining their home languages. We seek to address this gap by shedding light on familiar teaching practices that can help bridge this divide. These practices are not new – many exceptional teachers of multilingual learners have employed them for decades – but they are becoming less prevalent in under-resourced classrooms as teachers experience pressures to demonstrate student achievement through standardized assessments (Moon et al., 2007).

### Instructional Practices

In the following section, we explore three practices and examine research that has used a culturally sustaining lens to provide educators, teachers, and administrators with instructional strategies that align with SOR standards and leverage students' linguistic diversity.

### Word Study

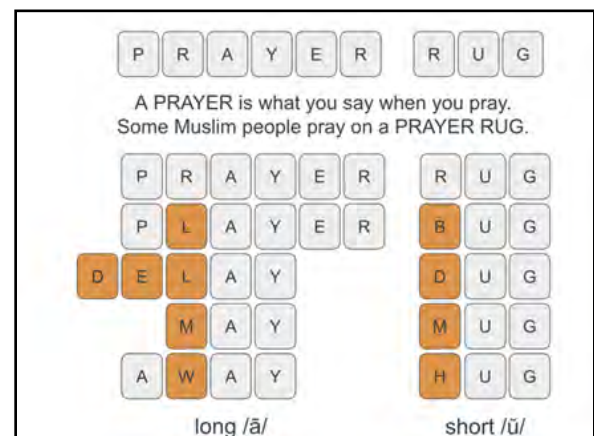
Word study is the structural analysis of words. When studying words, children discover underlying patterns in word structure (Henderson, 1990) which supports the development of decoding skills and strategies for determining the meaning of unknown words (Ehri, 2004; 2020). Research on word study (Zutell, 1992) offers the following insights: word learning is an interactive process rather than an isolated skill; word study supports decoding, vocabulary, and spelling; and builds on children's motivation, knowledge, and experiences. Additionally, word study can be implemented as both an analytic and synthetic

approach to phonics instruction (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri 2004, 2020).

Choosing words to structurally analyze is a key skill named in the Texas Science of Teaching Reading Educator Standards (2021). The choice of words to study can and should be informed by the teacher's understanding of reading development (Castles et al., 2018), knowledge of research-supported phonics instruction (Ehri, 2004, 2020), and knowledge of the children in their classroom. While some early phonics patterns require explicit instruction, teachers can connect them to learners' existing knowledge and choose culturally sustaining words (Bear et al., 2000). Words are texts and just like books, words can serve as mirrors that reflect children's lives or windows that invite children to learn about the lives of others (Bishop, 1990). For example, the word prayer rug (a culturally and religiously meaningful word for many Muslim students) offers a chance to explore more words in the -ug or -ay family (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Word Play using Meaningful Words*



When choosing words, teachers can select words that are meaningful to learners in their classrooms. For example, a reading interventionist working with a group of multilingual learners (Wissman, 2021) chose culturally meaningful words such as *Muslim*,

*mosque*, or *immigrant*. The teacher might study interesting words that children point out as the group reads books together. Words like *bundle*, *castle*, and *flower*. These word choices serve to expand children’s vocabularies and to teach important phonics pattern blends (sl, nd, st), diphthongs (ow), digraphs (qu), and the silent final e (le).

Studying children’s names can also be a culturally sustaining approach to exploring letters and sounds. For example, Fatima and Adriel can identify the letter Aa in their names and compare the lowercase and uppercase forms. They can also compare the short a sound in Fătima and the long a sound in Ādriel. It should be noted that children’s names can be highly irregular due to the many cultural and linguistic influences on naming practices and thus are not well-suited for teaching phonics patterns. After selecting meaningful words to study, teachers can expand word analysis by engaging in playful exploration – adding, deleting, and substituting letters to build additional words. Manipulatives such as letter tiles are helpful here. This teaching strategy highlights relationships among word families, which builds children’s resources for decoding by analogy. An example of playful word exploration using the word prayer rug is illustrated in Figure 1.

### Beautiful Books

Creating Beautiful Books is an instructional strategy utilized to support oral and written language development while honoring a child’s diverse ways of knowing and being in the world (Hoffman & Roser, 2012). Teachers begin with a small bounded book of three pages. The cover is designed by the student creating a sense of ownership and authorship. Creating Beautiful Books makes space for a variety of different types of work a) dictation and drawing b) collaborative writing between the teacher and the student through shared writing and c) picture books (Hoffman & Roser, 2012). The teacher and student collaborate to choose the type of

writing they will work on, and then share their work with others.

Through dictation and drawing, teachers sit next to beginning writers, helping them uncover some “topics” for their work with crayons or markers and then asking whether they would like a word for their illustration. Sticky notes or word cards are used rather than writing on children’s original artwork. This personal interaction with the child can lead to tailored instruction. During these interactions, purposeful skills are introduced. For example, a teacher might say something like “You told me *tiger* starts with a t, so I’m making a letter t to start the word.” These opportunities foster mindful writing experiences where teachers provide individualized instruction that is both meaningful and important to a child’s development

**Figure 2**

*A Beautiful Book*



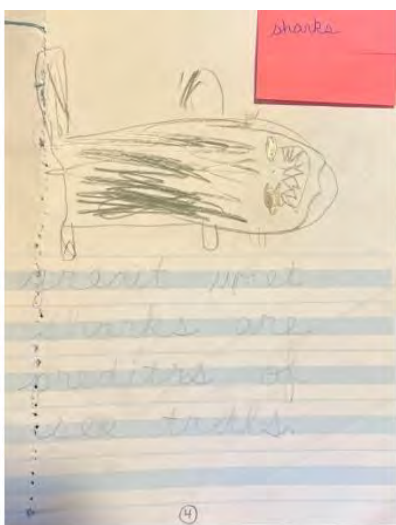
Note: Teacher and student collaborate on a topic, strategies, and representations.

When creating beautiful books, “sharing the pen” is a collaborative process that can encourage and strengthen young writers. It evolves from a child’s interest in wanting to

string together letters or words, creating lists or messages, and moves into a teacher stretching that idea into sentences or a story. Using oral language, the teacher invites the child to help with parts of the message supplying words as the message is being written. Research suggests that sharing the pen can provide a “nudge” instead of a “push” toward conventional forms of writing (Glover, 2010). Teachers of multilingual learners can use children’s drawings as a springboard to invite children to dictate a sentence or two about their picture. As the teacher writes down the child’s words, they model how the writing can be placed on the page (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Beautiful Book Example*



Note: Teacher uses phonetic spelling to dictate how writing can be placed on the page with a student's drawing.

Centering children’s experiences and language as the focal point in the curriculum empowers students' ideas and various languages. These experiences allow space for children to reach their fullest potential while fostering an identity as a writer. When we begin to see the power of the narratives that reflect experience as critical in a learner's path, we empower children to participate in the broader community (Freire; 1970/2000).

## Running Records

A running record is an assessment tool developed to capture students’ reading responses with a standard set of conventions related to meaning, structural, and visual cues. This tool supports educators in analyzing and addressing perceived strengths and challenges within the student’s developing reading processing system (Stouffer, 2021). While these tools have generally been effective in aiding teachers to infer their students’ reading abilities, some scholars have acknowledged limitations when using running records with multilingual learners (Briceño & Klein, 2018).

Briceño & Klein (2018) describe how teachers can identify and leverage the linguistic strengths of students to challenge prevailing deficit perspectives surrounding multilingual learners. They advocate for educators to possess a comprehensive understanding of multilingual students' language-related errors and their correlation with running records.

For example, a common error that might occur on a running record is a student pronouncing the word “walk” instead of “walked” when reading. Multilingual students often omit the -ED when reading, which is a common language-related error. Recognizing the distinction between language-related approximations and conventional reading errors could significantly empower teachers to better support their multilingual students and thereby promote equitable teaching within the classroom (Briceño & Klein, 2018). Additionally, the research underscores the critical role of teachers' proficiency and analyzing data from running records for effective instruction (Briceño & Klein, 2018; Noguerón-Liu, 2020).

Although running records have faced criticism for their association with cueing systems and miscue analysis theories (Goodman et al., 2005), Noguerón-Liu (2020) argues that incorporating language-related perspectives, such as translanguaging can enrich miscue analytic

approaches. Briceño & Klein (2018) propose that educators reassess their practices of using running records through a language-oriented lens, focusing on language-related approximations to foster efficient, effective, and equitable teaching.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this summary was to revisit common literacy pedagogical practices using a culturally sustaining early literacy lens to enhance learning for multilingual learners. Research indicates that the practices mentioned above can enrich and broaden the monolingual perspective, fostering a shift towards an asset-based perspective that embraces multilingual learners. As we consider ways to support multilingual emergent readers, it is important to incorporate research-based instruction and practices that honor children's linguistic strengths.

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