



## The Promise of Paired Literacy

By Susan Hopewell & Kathy Escamilla  
Bueno Center for Multicultural Education, University of Colorado

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It is a well established fact that children in bilingual programs do as well as, or better than, their peers in all English programs. Further, they reap the cognitive, social, personal, and economic advantages of knowing more than one language. The scientific evidence is indisputable (August & Shanahan, 2006; Rolstad, Mohoney, & Glass, 2008); yet we continue to debate the merits of bilingual education versus monolingual education rather than directing our energy to increase the quality of our bilingual programs (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). The time has come to shift the tenor of the conversation away from language of instruction to an exploration and articulation of our most promising practices. One such practice is *paired literacy* (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Paired literacy is a holistic approach to teaching reading in which students learn to read in two languages simultaneously beginning in kindergarten or first grade. Traditionally, this has meant that students either participate in two literacy blocks each day, or that the literacy block alternates languages by day. Current iterations blur these divisions, so that there is a more flexible use of languages within a unified literacy block. The success of this model depends upon a comprehensive view of the literate human being in which concepts and languages contribute to a unique and inseparable whole. It recognizes that most of our students are simultaneous bilinguals who are born in the United States; they are not confused by the speaking and learning of two languages (Capp, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005). They have been doing so since birth.

Holistic bilingualism situates languages as part of a complex, dynamic, and integrated system (Grosjean, 1989). Languages are not autonomous units operating in isolation, but rather heterogeneous parts that form a synergetic whole. Altering one part of the system has an effect on other parts of the system. This means that any time spent studying one language is time that contributes to the entire linguistic system. A seemingly small change, the addition of a single vocabulary word, for instance, is not just a gain in one language, but a gain in the whole linguistic system. The child who learns that *apple* and *manzana* are words for the same concept gains linguistic flexibility and knowledge about the arbitrary nature of words. Patterns between and among languages allow for exponential linguistic growth as is the case when a student grasps the concept of cognates and is able to strengthen the associations and bonds that form the whole. These seemingly simple advances permanently alter the integration of the languages within the complex system. Biliteracy, then, within this holistic framework, is understood to be a process and a journey with fluid and varying destinations.

The outdated argument that a first language is a bridge to English must be abandoned to make room for a broader conceptualization of all languages contributing to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Spanish is not a bridge to English or English a bridge to Spanish. Rather, each contributes to a larger linguistic system and the knowledge gained in one contributes to knowledge about the other. These contributions and influences are multidirectional. Thus, we need to expand our concern from second language acquisition to bilingual acquisition. This shift recognizes that any base language that comes into contact with another language will be permanently modified or restructured simply because it has come into contact with that alternative language. Further, it challenges the idea that students should not engage in formal literacy instruction in a second language until they have reached a particular reading level in their base language, or an oral proficiency level in their additional language. Paired instruction eliminates the false separation of literacies, and engages students in a fuller literacy learning experience that integrates reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, processing, creating, and analyzing across languages.

As researchers, we have been exploring how to cultivate, assess, and interpret a trajectory toward biliteracy using a paired literacy approach. Our longitudinal evidence confirms that paired literacy instruction, when implemented strategically, results in accelerated literacy acquisition in both languages in reading and writing (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2010; Soltero-González, Escamilla, & Hopewell, in press). These practices demand that teachers plan with great foresight, and that they attend purposefully to literacy as a holistic endeavor that is facilitated by

multiple and differing forms of input rather than as separate accomplishments that are language specific. Paired literacy practices are not duplicative, and do not involve concurrent translation. They begin with literacy instruction that is valid for the internal structure of each language and which honors authentic teaching and learning. Literacy materials in Spanish, for instance, should not be mere translations of English language programs. Further, pedagogies developed to facilitate the teaching and learning of English should not be forced upon the Spanish language. As an example, consider that in Spanish the five vowel sounds are consistent and do not change their sound when paired with consonants. In contrast, English vowel sounds change depending on the word pattern and their pairings with consonants. Even though Spanish and English share an alphabetic principle, their internal structures are quite different. Analytic approaches to teaching literacy need to understand and be based upon the utilization of "best practice" principles that are specific to each language. In other words, the internal structure of Spanish reveals that teaching the vowels first, a practice that would make no sense from an English language perspective, is a sound practice.

Paired literacy requires teachers to be astute observers of students. Emerging bilingual students distribute and acquire literacy skills and knowledge across languages. As students begin to control literacy skills in one language, they should be expected to apply them to the other. Successful students do not compartmentalize languages or learnings, and one of the goals of paired literacy pedagogies is to make these connections more explicit as early as possible. There is no reason that a student who understands the concept of a letter or a word in one language, cannot be shown how these concepts function in the other. Each new literacy accomplishment should be connected across languages with explicit comparisons of the similarities and differences students will encounter by language. Teachers expand students' repertoires by extending their meaning-making opportunities to include those that can only be accessed by bilingual learners (e.g. cognate recognition).

Finally, the co-existence of two or more languages in emerging bilingual children contributes experiences and knowledge that can never be measured or understood independent of one another. Emerging bilingual children cannot, and should not, be expected to demonstrate the totality of their literacy capabilities solely in one language. We have found that students who are progressing along a satisfactory trajectory toward biliteracy demonstrate Spanish language literacy skills that are slightly more advanced than their English language literacy skills, but that a large discrepancy is not apparent between the two. The only way to measure and document this trajectory is to assess productive and receptive skills in each language and to compare them side by side. Purposeful instruction results in less discrepancy between what students know and apply in one language and what they know and apply in the other, but there is no way to know this without bilingual assessment.

In sum, paired literacy practices in which students learn to read, write, speak, listen, view, process, create, and analyze across languages beginning in kindergarten or first grade hold much promise for our emerging bilingual learners. Purposeful and deliberate instruction that connects languages expands students' opportunities to learn.

### About the Authors

Kathy Escamilla is a professor in education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She does research on biliteracy development and assessment of Spanish-speaking Latino teacher children. She has over 35 years of experience in the field of bilingual/ESL education as a teacher, researcher, and school administrator.

Susan Hopewell is a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research focuses on strengthening biliteracy education for Spanish-English bilingual children in the United States. Her K-12 teaching experience includes 8 years as a classroom teacher in a dual language elementary school and 4 years as the literacy coach in a maintenance bilingual program.

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