

January 2015

Book review: Biliteracy from the start: Biliteracy squared in action

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Recommended Citation

Allison Briceño. "Book review: Biliteracy from the start: Biliteracy squared in action" *Bilingual Research Journal* (2015): 353-356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2015.1091052>

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Book Review of:

Escamilla, K., Hopewell, S., Butvilofsky, S., Sparrow, W., Soltero-González, L., Ruiz-Figueroa, O., & Escamilla, M. (2014). *Biliteracy from the start: Literacy squared in action*. Philadelphia, PA; Caslon Publishing.

Authors: Kathy Escamilla, Susan Hopewell, Sandra Butvilofsky, Wendy Sparrow, Lucinda Soltero-González, Olivia Ruiz-Figueroa, Manuel Escamilla.

Title: Biliteracy from the start: Literacy squared in action

Year of publication: 2014

Place of publication: Philadelphia, PA

Publisher: Caslon Publishing

Number of pages: 224

Price: \$37.95 paperback

ISBN: 978-1-934000-13-7

Book review by Allison Briceño, Ed.D.

In their innovative new book, *Biliteracy from the start: Literacy squared in action*, Escamilla and colleagues shifted the binary debate about bilingual education from English-only or bilingual to how to best serve simultaneous bilingual students. Many emergent bilingual students are simultaneous bilinguals, learning both Spanish and English before the age of five (Baker, 2001), and living in communities or homes in which both languages are used. Escamilla et al. argue that since “bilingualism is their dominant language” (p. 5), it is appropriate and beneficial to provide literacy instruction in both Spanish and English to these students, from the start of their schooling. *Biliteracy from the Start* is designed to help practitioners implement a paired literacy program, kindergarten through fifth grade, building on students’ knowledge and skills in each language to support acquisition of the other. It provides an instructional framework for literacy in two languages, called Literacy Squared, which includes bilingual assessment practices, biliteracy units, lesson plans, prompts for teachers, an observation protocol, writing rubrics, biliterate reading zones, instructional practices specific to biliteracy, and examples of student work. Literacy Squared has been implemented in five states with over 250 teachers and

4,000 students, but since the book is geared toward practitioners it contains only a brief summary of the research that began a decade ago.

Literacy Squared improves upon current bilingual instructional models in a number of ways. Dual language programs traditionally separate languages (Lindholm-Leary, 2001), inhibiting teachers from using instructional strategies that support transfer from one language to another (Cummins, 2008). Literacy Squared resolves the language separation issue by teaching transfer strategies. Instead of isolating the languages, Literacy Squared explicitly teaches students to use what they know in one language to support acquisition of the other, with the goal of developing “self-extending bilingual communicative systems” (p. 67). The framework includes specific instructional strategies to develop cross-language connections, including bilingual books, LottaLara (multiple readings of text), cognate instruction and “thedictado,” an adaptation of a dictation exercise commonly used in Mexico. Simultaneous bilingual students live in a bilingual world; strategies that help them see the connection between the two language systems build on their strengths and support the development of both languages.

Literacy Squared is holistic from a linguistic perspective, as it considers the students’ abilities in both Spanish and English and supports bidirectional transfer, and it is also holistic from a literacy perspective, incorporating 25 percent each of reading, writing, oracy and metalanguage in a given lesson for reciprocal gains. This structure reflects the critical role that language plays in literacy acquisition and enables teachers and students to use linguistic transfer to support bilingual language and literacy development. Literacy Squared acknowledges the importance of oral language development for academic success and includes a strong focus on oracy. Specific metalanguage strategies are incorporated to help students see and talk about the relationships between and within languages, and ultimately use bidirectional language transfer.

Since transfer can be bidirectional (Gebauer, Zaunbauer & Moller, 2013; Talebi, 2013) instructional practices to develop metalanguage are included in both languages.

Bilingual programs often start literacy instruction in one language, usually Spanish, and add English literacy after a year or more of school, reflecting a theory of sequential biliteracy. Baker (2001) considered children aged 6 or older who learn a native language first, and then a second language, to be sequential bilinguals. In contrast, simultaneous bilinguals begin acquiring two languages between the ages of 0 and 5. *Biliteracy from the Start's* model pairs literacy instruction in both languages in kindergarten or before, matching the simultaneous bilingual child's oral and/or aural use of both languages. Typically, the heavier cognitive load occurs in Spanish, allowing English instruction to build on the concepts learned in Spanish. One example provided is a week-long study of two versions of *The Three Little Pigs*. Kinder students listen to a southwestern version in Spanish to understand the story and the way repetitive language is used. They are then introduced to an English version of the three little pigs. Already understanding the general plot, the students are able to focus on the book's language and the language needed to compare and contrast the two versions of the story. Spanish and English literacy instruction is strategically coordinated to support student learning in both languages. The paired literacy environments support transfer between languages and reciprocity among reading, writing, listening and speaking. The authors recommend a gradual release framework for instruction, beginning with the teacher modeling and slowly releasing the task to the students with the goal of independence.

Often in bilingual programs the Spanish materials are translations of English language arts materials, so the content is neither culturally relevant to Spanish-speakers, nor based on the language itself. For example, the phonics section may emphasize consonants, like in English,

rather than vowels, which are both stronger and more regular than consonants in Spanish. In contrast, Escamilla et al.'s model grounds literacy instruction in the internal structure of each language and incorporates practices and curricula from Central and South American countries for Spanish literacy instruction.

There are two chapters on assessment – one on reading and one on writing – and each includes a “trajectory toward biliteracy” (p. 1), or an assessment paradigm that measures students’ growth toward biliteracy. While the reading trajectory has been confirmed by Escamilla et al.’s research, the writing trajectory is still hypothesized, with ongoing research. The trajectories are based on authentic reading and writing assessments – the DRA in English and EDL in Spanish, and authentic student writing – rather than multiple choice items, and are intended to develop a more positive discourse about biliterate students.

The research done by Escamilla and her colleagues shifts the assessment discourse from English-only to a bilingual understanding of students’ abilities. An assessment paradigm that truly considers students’ competencies in both languages begins to institutionalize the concept that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one (Grosjean, 1989). For example, a student who is on grade level in Spanish literacy but slightly behind her monolingual English peers in English literacy would still be considered on an appropriate trajectory for biliteracy, whereas the same student might be considered below grade level if only her English scores were taken into account.

Biliteracy from the Start provides many examples of paired student assessments from kindergarten through fifth grade. Placing a particular student’s Spanish writing sample next to an English writing sample, the authors explain the relationship between languages apparent in the student’s work, for example, what is known in both languages or one language, what has

transferred appropriately and what has not. A rubric that allows teachers to compare students' progress in both languages simultaneously is included. The rubric weighs content over skills, representing a bilingual view focused on communicative competence. There is also a qualitative analysis of student writing that explicitly helps teachers see how well students are transferring skills at the levels of discourse, the sentence, the phrase and phonics. Together, the rubric and qualitative analysis would be very helpful for planning instruction.

Viewing assessment through a bilingual lens supports teachers in actively looking for students' strengths. Observing what a child is able to do in both languages allows the teacher to see what skills have transferred from one language to the other and what needs to be quickly reinforced in a certain language. Holistically observing the child's strengths in literacy across languages allows teachers to "teach to [students'] potential" (p. 96) and saves instructional time, as teachers do not need to reteach the same concepts in the second language, but instead briefly review them or provide the necessary vocabulary. For example, if students have learned how to write subtraction word problems in Spanish, their English instruction around that topic might focus on vocabulary such as "less than" or "fewer than." Viewing assessment through a bilingual lens gives teachers a more complete view of students' competencies, enabling them to better inform instruction. In addition, a bilingual view of assessment could limit the over-identification of emergent bilinguals as special education students (Baker, 2011), as educators will be better able to distinguish real learning differences from nascent English language abilities (Harry & Klinger, 2006).

While the assessment chapters in *Biliteracy from the Start* contribute a valuable approach to bilingual assessment, they tend to focus on diagnostic and summative assessments that benchmark children a few times during the year, rather than ongoing, formative assessment that

guides instruction on a daily basis. The authors explicitly show how their assessment tools can be used to support student learning, but further development of daily assessment practices to inform instruction would be of interest.

The research on the Literacy Squared framework has centered on simultaneous bilingual students. Additional research is needed on the impact of the Literacy Squared model on monolingual English and monolingual Spanish students, and in contexts with different proportions of these student populations. Historically, one of the benefits of dual language programs is the integration of Latino students with native English speakers, as languages and cultures are shared (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). It is unclear to the reader to what extent Literacy Squared classes are integrated with only the emerging simultaneous bilinguals being included in the research, or whether students are segregated. While bilingual students are often densely populated in a small number of urban schools that tend to have large proportions of English learners (García, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; Gifford & Valdés, 2006), the ability to have integrated bilingual classes would be important in most schools.

To summarize, this practitioner-focused book is clear, well-written, includes the research that supports its main concepts, and has a plethora of tools and instructional practices for educators specific to biliteracy, including recommendations for how to use the practices in each language. *Biliteracy from the Start* provides a holistic view of bilingual planning, instruction and assessment that is unlike – and I would argue superior to – most bilingual models currently in practice. Each chapter has key terms and guiding questions at the beginning, as well as a conclusion and questions for reflection at the end, making the book easily used with small groups of teachers or an entire staff. I highly recommend this book to anyone working with or making decisions about simultaneous bilingual students, including elementary teachers, administrators,

literacy coaches, district-level literacy and bilingual coordinators, and teacher educators, as it provides a deep understanding of how to best serve emerging simultaneous bilingual students. Its presentation of an instruction plan specific to simultaneous bilinguals is a new contribution to the field of bilingual education.

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