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An Asset-based Practice for Teaching Bilingual Readers

Emily C. Zoeller & Allison Briceño

Abstract

When working with bilingual readers, teaching for equity means building on students' linguistic strengths. To do so, we must provide intentionally designed holistic literacy instruction that encourages students to use their full literacy and linguistic repertoire. This article describes an asset-oriented approach called *Transliteracy* to help teachers leverage and develop students' cross-linguistic knowledge. We provide an Observation Framework for foundational skills and a Prompting Model to support teachers in implementing Transliteracy, even in English-only settings. Transliteracy offers a model by which we teach from what students already know, and celebrate, rather than ignore, bilingualism as a path to more equitable literacy instruction.

Teaser text

How can teachers build on bilingual students' strengths? This article describes how an approach called Transliteracy leverages reading strategies across languages.

An Asset-based Practice for Teaching Bilingual Readers

As teachers of bilingual readers, we know we are supposed to build on students' strengths, but we are not taught how. In this article, we describe a method teachers can use to observe reading behaviors in Spanish and English, analyze for strengths, and provide explicit teaching that builds on students' bilingual resources. We call this approach reading across languages, or *Transliteracy* (Williams, 1994). Maestra Linda's teaching of Felix (all names are pseudonyms) illustrates the method.

A bilingual reader processes text by drawing on their entire linguistic repertoire, across languages (Butvilofsky et al., 2020; García, 2020). Scholars have used the term *holistic bilingualism* to suggest that a bilingual's two languages reinforce one another-- the bilingual brain is a unique and unified whole, not two separate monolingual brains in one (Dworin, 2003; Grosjean, 1989). For teachers in both bilingual and English-only settings, a holistic bilingual perspective makes sense because literacy learning across languages has been found to be bidirectional; literacy in Spanish supports literacy in English, and vice versa (Soltero-González, 2012).

Recent research has looked at how knowledge across languages applies specifically to foundational skills. To encode and decode words in Spanish and English, bilinguals use the totality of their phonetic knowledge in both languages (Butvilofsky et al., 2020; Williams & Lowrance-Faulhaber, 2018). However, without explicit instruction, many bilinguals do not automatically identify cross-linguistic connections such as cognates (Kelly & Kohnert, 2012). One study found that even proficient bilingual readers struggled to use punctuation appropriately in both English and Spanish, often misunderstanding the text as a result (Briceño, 2021). Teachers should make cross-language connections transparent; in fact, when bilingual readers

received explicit instruction on how word-solving strategies in one language could be applied to another, they improved in their ability to decode (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2020).

Bilinguals bring knowledge of multiple languages to their literacy learning, but this knowledge is often overlooked due to monolingual expectations that emphasize English. As reading specialists in bilingual settings, we noticed how monolingual norms prevented our teaching from leveraging students' strengths. To combat this inequity, we designed the Transliteracy approach for deliberate cross-language teaching of reading skills. As Figure 1 shows, the teacher begins by observing a reader's behaviors at an instructional level text in both languages and conducting a side-by-side analysis. This analysis often reveals a helpful behavior in one language that can be explicitly taught in the other. The cycle progresses as the teacher continues to observe and teach based on students' strengths.

Insert Figure 1 here

Transliteracy Teaching Cycle

Linda and Felix

To illustrate the Transliteracy approach, we will describe the experience of Maestra Linda and her student, Felix. We have selected this case from a larger study about Transliteracy and have adapted some aspects for clarity. A Latinx home English speaker, Linda was student-teaching virtually in a first grade Dual Language class. Instruction was in Spanish for 90% of the day and in English for the remaining 10%; the school maintained strict separation of languages. Linda observed Felix's early reading in both Spanish and English over Zoom. Felix had recently arrived from Mexico; he was articulate in Spanish, learning English, and was considered below grade level in literacy in both languages.

Observing and Analyzing Reading in Both Languages

For Maestra Linda to provide teaching that built on Felix's strengths, she would first need to identify those strengths through close observation of reading and writing. Observational formative assessment data (such as students' writing or teachers' anecdotal notes) can be effective to drive day-to-day instruction for any student (Briceño & Klein, 2018; Clay, 2019). For bilingual students, observations like these are imperative for revealing students' full range of linguistic knowledge (Escamilla et al., 2014). Despite the school's strict separation of languages, Linda asked Felix to read in both languages so she could observe his knowledge of foundational skills. She shared the texts with Felix through Zoom, took notes, and recorded the observations so she could reference them later. Linda then used the Transliteracy Observation Framework (Table 1) to analyze the information and look for patterns.

Insert Table 1 here

Maestra Linda's observation revealed that Felix had many reading strengths across languages. He consistently evidenced one-to-one correspondence and left-to-right directionality (with the exception of reading "but" for "tub"). He used phonics in both languages, including the sound of the Spanish "e" when reading the English word "cute." Felix used word attack strategies appropriate for each language (syllabication in Spanish and onset-rime and word parts in English). High-frequency words were a strength for Felix in both languages. His use of punctuation, however, was stronger in Spanish than in English. Whereas in Spanish, Felix read the punctuation which supported prosodic reading of the text, in English, he used punctuation inconsistently and read robotically. Based on her cross-language analysis, Linda decided that her first Transliteracy lesson for Felix would be to show him that he could read punctuation in

English texts - just like he did in Spanish texts. After identifying her teaching point, she turned to the Transliteracy Prompting Model.

Moving from Analysis to Teaching

Maestra Linda used the Transliteracy Prompting Model (Table 2) to make explicit to Felix how a reading strategy he already uses in Spanish could apply in English, too. She delivered the mini-lesson through a brief conference during independent reading. She emphasized how attending to punctuation helps the reader read the text in the way the author intended, making explicit the link between foundational skills, fluency, and comprehension.

Insert Table 2 here

The Transliteracy Prompting Model (Table 2) provided Maestra Linda a roadmap for leveraging strengths across languages. In the session, Maestra Linda *honored* Felix's effective use of reading to punctuation in Spanish. She *applied* the strategy by drawing a specific connection to text in English and *demonstrated* with a clear model. She *identified nuances* of how punctuation is different in Spanish and English, and she closed by *inviting* Felix to try on the strategy. Linda's teaching maintained a dual focus of foundational skills, fluency, and reading comprehension by showing Felix how the use of punctuation helped the reader understand the story. As a result of the Transliteracy teaching, Felix demonstrated an increased ability to read punctuation in English, which helped him read with prosody (phrasing). In subsequent interactions, Linda supported Felix to secure this behavior consistently.

Punctuation wasn't the only focus for Maestra Linda's Transliteracy teaching. She showed Felix an important phonetic difference between Spanish and English, teaching him how to read and write the silent /e/ in words with vowel-consonant-e, an English-specific pattern. In writing, Linda observed Felix's organization, sentence structures, word choice, and orthography

in both languages. She utilized Transliteracy to teach strengths from one language to the other, leveraging Felix's competence with transition words from English to Spanish, and his competence with opening sentences from Spanish to English. Comparing behaviors across languages illuminated how Felix's oral language development influenced his literacy; she realized he was neglecting introductory sentences in English not because he didn't know that he *should*, but because he didn't know *how* to compose one. By providing language scaffolds and oral language rehearsals, Linda equipped Felix with both the awareness and the supports needed to successfully apply this writing technique.

Reflections and Applications

Maestra Linda's teaching example illustrates how a holistic approach can shape literacy development by harnessing strengths. She concluded, "For my student, the Transliteracy model was empowering." Consistent with other participants in our study, Linda reported that this approach differed from the language-separation approach used at her school. We have learned that replacing a "one language" approach with a bilingual one unlocks the literate potential of the bilingual learner. This entails challenging the status quo. To apply with your own students, teachers can:

1. Choose an aspect of literacy (e.g. foundational skills, writing, reading strategies)
2. Obtain a student sample in both languages (e.g. a dictation, a writing sample, or an informal reading inventory).
3. Record behaviors side-by-side (see Observation Framework)
4. Analyze cross-linguistically: what can the child do in one language but not the other?
5. Design a Transliteracy lesson (see Prompting Model)

The Transliteracy practice applies broadly and in different contexts, as initial findings from our study suggest (Zoeller & Briceño, 2021). Linda implemented the Prompting Model through a reading conference with one student, but application can also occur in guided reading or a class mini-lesson. Since not all teachers are bilingual and not all have expertise in literacy, collaboration is critical. Observation in the student's home language can be gathered through the help of colleagues, district translators, school personnel and most importantly, students' families. Teachers have noticed positive outcomes for many bilingual readers, but especially for students like Felix for whom cross-language awareness is not intuitive, and for newcomers to the U.S. who have literacy knowledge from their home language.

When working with bilingual readers, teaching for equity means re-examining what counts as knowledge and working actively to reveal diverse strengths on which to build (Zoeller, in press). Transliteracy offers a model by which we teach from what students already know and celebrate, rather than ignore, students' bilingualism. This is a path to more equitable literacy teaching.

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Table 1

Transliteracy Observation Framework for Foundational Skills

Foundational Skills	Observations in Spanish	Observations in English
Uses one-to-one Correspondence and Directionality	Student used one-to-one correspondence on short and familiar words. Controlled left to right directionality.	Student used one-to-one correspondence and read left to right in most cases. Exception: substituted the word “but” for “tub”.
Uses Phonology & Phonics	Appeared to control all Spanish sound-symbol correspondence (probably reflects transparent orthography of Spanish language).	Slowly articulated /sw/ /i/ /m/, appropriately blending the /sw/ Applied Spanish phonics to the word “cute,” reading it as /cu-/ /tay/ (English “silent e” may be unfamiliar)
Uses Word Analysis	Broke down longer words into syllables, for example: “bos-que”, “a-re-na” “a-mi-gos” Self-corrected “la mar” to “el mar”.	Successfully decoded “th-at” using onset-rime. Successfully decoded “jumping” by breaking into two parts /jump/ /ing/. Did not pronounce “-ed” in “looked”, nor “y” in “funny”.
Uses High Frequency Words	Correctly read almost all high frequency words (Self-corrected “la” to “el”)	Was familiar with many high frequency words in English. Omitted the word “for” in paragraph 4.
Uses Punctuation	Consistently paused at periods when reading in Spanish. Changed intonation for exclamations and questions.	Did not read punctuation and lacked prosody (i.e. “robot reading”).
Transliteracy Opportunity/ies	Student read punctuation and read fluently in Spanish but not in English. Student decoded phonetically in both languages but not yet familiar with some English suffixes (-ed, -y) and spelling patterns (silent e).	

Table 2*Transliteracy Prompting Model*

Skill or strategy: Reading punctuation		Direction: from Spanish to English
Steps	Purpose	Teacher script
Honor	Honor and affirm an instance in	I noticed that when you were reading in Spanish, you

	<p>which the student effectively used a specific skill or strategy in their reading or writing. Point to the specific example in the text; tell them what they did and why it was helpful.</p>	<p>paid attention to the punctuation marks that show you how to read. [Pointing to a sentence with a period] Here, you knew to stop and take a breath before moving on to the next sentence. [Pointing to an exclamation point] You read this line with expression and [pointing to a question mark] Here, you made your voice go up like you were asking a question. What you're doing is reading the punctuation, and it's helpful because it helps us understand the author's message.</p>
Apply	<p>Explain that the skill can be applied to a text in the other language. Make the connection explicit and direct.</p>	<p>You can use this strategy when you're reading in English as well. Just like in Spanish, the marks tell us where to rest and how to change our voice.</p>
Demonstrate (in English)	<p>Reference a text in the other language, and have prepared a place in the text that lends itself to the desired skill. This might be a place in which the child was partially successful or not successful in their reading or writing. Model for the child how to try out the skill. Provide a think aloud, making transparent the in-the-head activities the student takes on.</p>	<p>Let's practice reading punctuation in English. [Teacher takes out a new English text]. This is a story called "Put me in the Zoo." On the first page, they are dragging the cheetah out. I'll read it first, and you follow along and see how my voice sounds when I am reading. [Teacher reads enthusiastically, "Out you go!"] Did you hear the difference in my voice? I'm thinking the author used the exclamation point to show that the zoo guards did not like him in the zoo so I read this in an excited voice.</p>
Identify differences or nuances	<p>Consider aspects of the language that might be at play as this skill is applied in the other language (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) Make transparent these similarities or differences. Invite the child to engage in noticing and naming, building metalinguistic awareness.</p>	<p>You know that in Spanish, question marks and exclamation points are at the beginning and end of sentences, but in English they're only at the end. We have to think extra carefully about what's happening and how it might sound.</p>
Invite	<p>Direct the child to try out this skill in reading or writing, right then and there. In future sessions, kindly hold them accountable for utilizing the skill.</p>	<p>It's your turn to read now. Practice using the punctuation to help you figure out how to read the sentence. Think about what the author is saying and how the punctuation helps you understand the story.</p>

Figure 1

Transliteracy Teaching Cycle