



# COLUMN: BILITERACY IN TEXAS

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## COLUMN INTRODUCTION

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*The number of bilingual students in our schools is growing which includes many different kinds of learners, each with their unique potential and literacy needs. These multilingual learners are in various educational programs including mainstream, ESL, sheltered, bilingual, language immersion, or world language classes. Though not mutually exclusive, we might refer to them by using these categories: emergent bilinguals (students who are acquiring English as an additional language), heritage language speakers (students who speak a language of their parents in addition to English), simultaneous bilinguals (students who have grown up with more than one language), sequential bilinguals (students who are acquiring an additional language after the beginning of formal education such as in a secondary world language classroom), or even dual-language learners (students are beginning their education by receiving instruction in two languages). This myriad of classifications of bilingual students only scratches the surface of understanding this growing and complex group of global citizens. Therefore, there is a need for all literacy educators (bilingual or not) to have working knowledge of biliteracy assessment, development, and instruction in order to help all students reach their full potential. This column will be devoted to discussing relevant trends of biliteracy in the state of Texas. If you would like to contribute to future columns, please contact the column editor Mandy Stewart at [MStewart7@twu.edu](mailto:MStewart7@twu.edu).*

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## LITERACY ASSESSMENTS: WHERE DO I BEGIN?

CYNTHIA RODRIGUEZ

I recently had the opportunity to lead a professional development for a group of bilingual and EL teachers. The topic was “Planning and Implementing Guided Reading in Bilingual and Dual Language Classrooms.” We began the session by discussing the first days of school. I posed questions that included, “What are our priorities the first week of school? What questions am I trying to answer about my students?” The responses below encapsulate what most all the teachers said, in some form or another:



*“My priorities are building relationships, getting to know my new group of kids in all ways. What is easy for them? What’s harder?”*

*“First off, I want my class to feel comfortable with me and each other.”*

*“Assessing comes first! From the first minutes, I’m taking notes-both physical and mental-learning as much about them as I can, as fast as I can.”*

*“In my dual language classroom, one of my first priorities is learning language preferences. Sometimes, my students can read and write in English but prefer to speak in Spanish. I have to know these things to give me my starting points.”*

*“Who are these humans that I am going to devote my life to for the next school year? What will we learn from each other? Who needs more challenge? Who needs more support?”*

*“I think of my class like a little family. So, right off we are learning about each other and how to communicate in a way that makes us all feel safe and comfortable. Once I establish that, I can dig in and get to work reading and writing.”*

After this discussion, I posed more specific questions: “What about reading and writing? Where do we begin with literacy instruction? What are the priorities there? What information do you need?” Some responses were:

*“With my second graders, I need to learn about the major areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing. I have assessments for each one.”*

*“I review their previous years testing outcomes. Then, I have my own assessments that help me know where they are compared to where they finished last school year.”*

*“I have a language assessment, I take running records and get writing samples from everyone within the first couple of weeks of school. Then I make my small groups for reading instruction.”*

*“I assess reading and writing in English and Spanish.”*

*“What is their level of phonemic awareness and phonics in English and Spanish? This is what is most important for me to know about my pre-k students.”*

These teachers hit the nail on the head! There are so many things that might feel overwhelming on the first days of school, especially for novice teachers. It is important to have clear priorities. What are the MOST CRITICAL areas that will get the school year off to a running start? What do I need to



know in order to move forward with literacy instruction that challenges and supports all my students? In this article, I will address those questions and share foundational details about literacy assessments.

As noted in the first set of teacher responses, developing positive relationships with our students is a priority. This makes sense—if we don't feel comfortable with the people around us, we are not going to want to contribute to discussions, take risks, or share our learning with others. We need our students to do all of those things and many others! Numerous studies have found that positive relationships are central to the ability to be self-determined and independent, thus making relationship building a key area to address to promote successful classrooms (Field & Hoffman, 2012).

Although the focus of this column is literacy assessments, the importance of relationship/community building in our classrooms cannot be overlooked. Without it, any efforts to challenge, support, motivate, and/or correct our students (in any content area) will be fruitless. As with any relationship, building trust takes time and energy. As teachers, we cannot underestimate the power of genuine relationships between and among ourselves and our students. How to most effectively do this may require further study for some, but some brief suggestions on how to develop and support our classroom community are:

1. Spend 1-on-1 time with each student.
2. Look for unique behaviors and/or characteristics about the student to comment on to the child.
3. Learn about their families, backgrounds, hobbies and interests.
4. Share your own stories, and be open.
5. Have a sense of humor.
6. Learn about their families, siblings, and home life.
7. Attend student events when possible.

*Adapted from Barile (2019).*

Now, let's consider the second set of teacher responses. What assessments are we using to help us form our literacy instruction? In [\*Assessment Literacy in a Standards-Based Urban Education Setting\*](#), Norman Webb (2002) states, "Literacy assessment is defined as the knowledge of the means for assessing what students know and can do, the interpretation of the results from these assessments, and application of assessment results to improve student learning and program effectiveness" (p. 4). To get a comprehensive understanding of the student's strength and needs in literacy, we must consider the four foundational skills of literacy learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When assessing reading and writing, the five essential components of literacy instruction must also be considered. These areas, as identified in the National Reading Panel Report (2000) are: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. These areas include early literacy skills so they do not need to be assessed in later grades.



Teachers have required benchmarks that must be completed for each student and submitted to the campus administration. However, these benchmarks are not sufficient to provide the data needed to make instructional plans and decisions. To do that, we must first determine what kind of literacy assessment the student or class needs. According to Munger et al., (2016), "Literacy assessments can be informal or formal, formative or summative, screenings or diagnostic tests. They can provide data at single points in time or to monitor progress over time" (p. 32). The first set of classroom data should be gathered at the beginning of the school year. Ongoing and informal assessments continue throughout the school year, but it is important to gather and record data using the same measures at different points in time (usually at the beginning, middle and end of the school year). These data can be used for several purposes: (1) to plan targeted instruction for each student, (2) to share with instructional committees to advocate for a student, whether for gifted and talented programs or interventions for struggling students, and, (3) to share with students and parents to show individual development over time.

Bilingual and dual language teachers must consider the language and literacy skills of each student in Spanish (or the other partner language) and English. Assessment for two-language children in the U.S. requires a positive schema around how two-languages interact in young children in the U.S. Assessment must combine concepts known in the first language with concepts being learned in the second language (Grosjean, 1989; Escamilla, 1998). Assessment for two-language children must consider how two languages interact. Research conducted by Escamilla and colleagues (1996) on 282 first-grade children in Arizona, Texas, and Illinois, demonstrated that children who are emerging bilinguals in English and Spanish regularly use two-languages in the following tasks: letter identification; word tests; writing vocabulary; text reading. Further, in daily writing lessons, students frequently use two languages. There are differences, as well as similarities, in emergent reading and writing behaviors of Spanish-speaking children. Outcomes in both languages should be considered to most effectively plan literacy instruction. (English assessments are not needed for students who are not proficient enough in English to understand the directions of each task.)

It is my hope that this column has provided a foundation for understanding the importance of using a variety of literacy assessments in order to plan the most effective opportunities for reading and writing for all students. Each teacher must develop their own way of managing assessments in terms of when to implement and how to record and use the outcomes of each to plan instruction and form small groups. Please review the appendices and references list for suggested resources to support further learning.

In the chart below, suggested assessments are provided for teachers to use in each literacy areas. Each resource is cited in the reference list.



GRADES	Listening	Speaking	Phonemic Awareness	Phonics	Vocabulary	Comprehension	Fluency
1	<b>Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM)</b> Can be used for assessing English and Spanish speaking and listening skills.		CORE phoneme deletion test  CORE Phonological Segmentation Test  <b>SPANISH:</b> CORE Spanish Phonemic Awareness Test	CORE Phonics Survey  CORE Graded High-Frequency Word Survey  Observation Survey: Letter ID  <b>SPANISH:</b> CORE Spanish Phonics Survey  Instrumento de Observación: Letter ID	CORE Vocabulary Screening  Writing Sample  <b>SPANISH:</b> CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory  Writing Sample	<b>English and Spanish:</b> Read Aloud a text and ask comprehension questions directed towards setting, characters and sequence of events, problem/solution, etc. (doing this with different genres provides further information regarding student interest and which is easier or harder).	<b>English and Spanish:</b> Running Record
2			CORE phoneme deletion test  CORE Phonological Segmentation Test  <b>Spanish:</b> CORE Spanish Phonemic Awareness Test	CORE Phonics Survey  CORE Graded High-Frequency Word Survey  <b>Spanish:</b> CORE Spanish Phonics Survey	CORE Vocabulary Screening  Writing Sample  <b>Spanish:</b> CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	CORE Reading Maze Comprehension  <b>Spanish:</b> Read Aloud with comprehension questions	<b>English and Spanish:</b> Running Record
3			Do not need to assess this area in grades 3 and up. (In some circumstances it would be necessary if	CORE Phonics Survey  CORE Graded High-Frequency Word Survey	CORE Vocabulary Screening  Writing Sample  <b>Spanish:</b>	CORE Reading Maze Comprehension  <b>Spanish:</b>	MASI-R Oral Reading Fluency Measures  <b>Spanish:</b>



		the child is significantly below grade level in literacy development)	<b>Spanish:</b> CORE Spanish Phonics Survey	CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	Read Aloud with comprehension questions	Miscue Analysis
4	Do not need to assess this area in grades 3 and up. (In some circumstances it would be necessary if the child is significantly below grade level in literacy development)		Writing Sample	CORE Vocabulary Screening	CORE Reading Maze Comprehension	MASI-R Oral Reading Fluency Measures
5-6			CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	Read Aloud with comprehension questions	<b>Spanish:</b> Miscue Analysis
			Writing Sample	CORE Vocabulary Screening	CORE Reading Maze Comprehension	MASI-R Oral Reading Fluency Measures
			CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	CORE Spanish Spelling Inventory	Read Aloud with comprehension questions	<b>Spanish:</b> Miscue Analysis

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## HELPFUL RESOURCE

Flores, Will A.; Arrasmith, Dean G. (2001). *The Traits of Effective Spanish Writing = Las características de la buena escritura en español. Second Edition*. Northwest Regional Education Lab.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2017). *2013-2017 American Community Survey 3-year Public Use Microdata Samples* [SAS data file]. Retrieved from [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_17\\_1YR\\_B16001&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_1YR_B16001&prodType=table)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Cynthia Rodriguez, PhD**, is a Lecturer of Reading in the School of Education at UNT-Dallas. She has been at UNT-Dallas since 2010. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses focused on literacy acquisition, assessment, and development for emerging bilingual learners. She is also the project director for “Bilingual Educators for Communities and Schools (BECAS)”, a Title 3 grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. As a part of this project, she is able to collaborate with bilingual and EL teachers throughout the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Prior to her time at UNT-Dallas, she was as Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura trainer at Texas Woman’s University and a bilingual teacher in Denton ISD.