



COLUMN: BILITERACY IN TEXAS

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COLUMN INTRODUCTION

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.

BORDER LITERACIES AND THE *PLAZA COMUNITARIAS* PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

In this column, I hope to contribute to the wider discussion on this topic by highlighting a specific binational adult literacy program called Plazas Comunitarias to illustrate how some adults are developing Spanish literacy on the border and explore to what extent a model like



Plazas could act as a bridge to both Spanish and English literacy learning. Among its many features, learners enrolled in Plazas can also work towards earning official certificates for primaria and secundaria (the equivalent to elementary and middle school) issued directly from the Ministry of Education in Mexico. At the same time, I take a look at the ways in which the local organizations that help implement the Plazas program play a role in overall community engagement and have the potential to be a valuable resource for Latinx families on the border and beyond, particularly for those with children enrolled in the school system. Therefore, K-12 educators working with Latinx families may well find programs such as Plazas to be a valuable community resource for parents by opening up avenues to literacy learning that could support both their and their children's development.

Keywords: border literacies, biliteracy, adult education, adult literacy

Borders are spaces where lives, identities, and languages intersect and continuously evolve. In the context of Texas – the state with the longest shared land border with Mexico – there is a unique opportunity for educators to explore the most pertinent biliteracy trends from a distinctly *transfronterizo* (transborder) perspective. For these reasons, it is particularly relevant to consider the implications of having a strong home language foundation and what this means in terms of biliteracy as it is understood and practiced in Latinx border settings.

An increasing number of educational researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in bilingual or multilingual settings have advocated for more linguistically and culturally relevant biliteracy learning opportunities. Broadly speaking, there has been a general shift towards more rights-based educational approaches that promote the right to learn in one's home language. Ongoing efforts to revise and improve biliteracy learning practices in Texas and beyond are driven in part by related research that suggests that having strong home language literacy (L1) can act as an effective means to support second language (L2) development, both in K-12 and adult education settings (Lukes, 2011).

In this column, I hope to contribute to the wider discussion on this topic by highlighting a specific binational adult literacy program called *Plazas Comunitarias* to illustrate how some adults are developing Spanish literacy on the border and explore to what extent a model like *Plazas* could act as a bridge to both Spanish and English literacy learning. Among its many features, learners enrolled in *Plazas* can also work towards earning official certificates for *primaria* and *secundaria* (the equivalent to elementary and middle school) issued directly from the Ministry of Education in Mexico. At the same time, I take a look at the ways in which the local organizations that help implement the *Plazas* program play a role in overall community engagement and have the potential to be a valuable resource for Latinx families on the border and beyond, particularly for those with children enrolled in the school system. Therefore, K-12 educators working with Latinx families may



well find programs such as *Plazas* to be a valuable community resource for parents by opening up avenues to literacy learning that could support both their and their children's development.

My interest in this topic stems from being a former *Plazas* literacy instructor at a community-based non-profit in Central Texas, an experience which gave me insight into adult emergent literacy learning and to the ways in which my students – many of them first-generation immigrants with fragmented educational backgrounds – navigated and negotiated their way through an unfamiliar territory and made use of different social and institutional networks. As someone who grew up in northern Mexico in a bilingual and bicultural family (my mother being from the U.S. and my father from Mexico), this experience opened my eyes to many of the complex challenges that adult Latinx emergent literacy learners and their families face, as well as the opportunities that were afforded to them through mutually-enriching learning spaces like the *Plazas* classes. Although I am unable to speak directly to the experiences of educators living and working in border contexts, my current doctoral research exploring the role and meaning of literacy in multilingual contexts has helped me to better understand the socially embedded nature of literacy. As such, I aim to offer some reflections on cross-border literacies from a distinctly bicultural and research-oriented perspective in hopes that educators might join in the conversation and seek new and innovative ways to support Latinx students and their parents.

BILITERACY ON THE BORDER

A great deal of research has indicated that learning is most effective when it happens in the language that is spoken at home (Hanemann & Scarpino, 2016). Looking at the issues surrounding biliteracy learning and instruction from a bordered perspective (in this case, literacy in English and Spanish), perhaps the most compelling argument in support of providing any type of home language literacy learning opportunities within and outside the school system is the one linking L1 literacy to increased L2 language acquisition (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009). Having a strong foundation of English literacy in the U.S. has been linked to upward economic and social mobility and democratic participation (Brandt, 2001) and is a key route to social inclusion for immigrants, something which many educators could likely attest to.

However, thinking about biliteracy in distinctly bordered terms also raises questions on what kinds of literacies are valued, according to whom, and for what purposes. Debates in the U.S. have ranged from regarding linguistic diversity (among other forms of diversity) as a societal strength to seeing it as a complication, and continuities in national and state-level educational policies point towards the prevalence of English-dominant approaches that largely exclude and marginalize diverse linguistic and cultural practices. This suggests that literacy itself has also been leveraged as a tool to reinforce social and linguistic stratification, often to the detriment and disenfranchisement of immigrant communities. The political tensions concerning immigration and trade between the U.S.



and Mexico in recent years have added a further layer of complexity to the debate on the educational rights of children and adults, regardless of their country of origin or immigration status. In the following section, I take a closer look at the *Plazas* program and discuss the potential it has to mediate some of these cross-border biliteracy issues.

THE *PLAZAS* COMUNITARIAS PROGRAM

The *Plazas* program originated in Mexico in the 1990s as a pathway for adults to gain basic educational qualifications; namely, the nationally recognized *primaria* and *secundaria* certificates that are standard requirements for employment and higher education in Mexico. The program is conducted in Spanish and in over 60 Indigenous languages across the country, and follows a curricular model called the ‘Educational Model for Life and Work’, which is closely aligned to the national curriculum and covers a wide range of topics including health, work, the environment, finances, and even migration. Coinciding with the significant increase in immigration from Mexico to the U.S. between 1990 to 2010, the program expanded its operations across the border in 2001 in response to a growing demand for relevant learning opportunities for Latinx adults living and working in the U.S., many of whom had limited formal schooling. Managed through the Ministry of Education in Mexico and the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), the program is open to any Spanish-speaking person (including Central and South American nationals) over the age of 15 in the U.S. who has not completed basic primary or lower secondary education in their home country.

Currently, there is a network of 43 Mexican consulates in the U.S. that coordinate with local sponsoring organizations to provide access to free *Plazas* program materials as well as ongoing technical assistance and training. The most recent data on the program indicates that there are approximately 250 *Plazas* operating across 38 states (with 35 of those in Texas) with around 23,000 learners enrolled in the program (INEA, 2020; Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior, 2020). The type of sponsoring organizations varies according to the needs and interests of different communities, but for the most part, they include places like local community colleges, independent school districts, nonprofits, churches, and correctional facilities.

According to INEA, the *Plazas* learning model is designed to be flexible and self-paced so that it can be easily adjusted to fit each learner’s needs and availability. While the program does not include any ESL materials, some informational literature does make direct reference to opportunities for ESL learning that can happen in parallel or as a result of attending *Plazas* classes (INEA, 2015). This was evident in the nonprofit where I was based, as many of our *Plazas* student referrals came from adult ESL classes within the same organization.

Although it is almost 20 years old, research on the impact and effectiveness of the *Plazas* program remains relatively limited. Participation and completion rates are not centrally reported and tend



to vary widely depending on how each sponsoring organization is able to administer the program. Many *Plazas* – including the one I worked in – rely almost entirely on volunteers to run, which in turn raises issues of adequate funding and turnover and highlights how the overall program sustainability is dependent on the buy-in and continued support of the local community. That said, there is some encouraging evidence as well: A UNESCO report featuring different case studies of *Plazas* (including one based within the El Paso Community College- Community Education Program) highlighted how in addition to being a space for Latinx adults to develop a home language literacy foundation, there was a strong link between *Plazas* and other educational opportunities in the wider community, including ESL and GED classes (Hanemann, 2016). The potential for *Plazas* to act as a bridge from Spanish to English literacy learning was further reinforced by research suggesting that English was one of the primary motivations for many learners to attend *Plazas* classes (Délano Alonso, 2018). Looking beyond the educational dimension of the program to wider social factors, my experiences as a *Plazas* instructor also demonstrated some of the ways in which the different organizations that house *Plazas* often act as “community resource hubs” (Sánchez Tyson, 2020, p. 96). Being based at a community-based nonprofit that offered a range of educational and health services to the local immigrant community, I saw the potential for each host institution to cater to the particular needs of local Latinx families and provide them with opportunities to participate more fully in their communities, and by extension, be more involved in their children’s schooling.

Several school districts in Texas – including Northside ISD, Nacogdoches ISD, Plano ISD, Conroe ISD, and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD – have previously incorporated *Plazas* into their parent engagement and outreach programs and activities and could therefore offer further reflections on their experiences and provide recommendations on best practices. Those interested in learning more about which *Plazas* are nearest to them could consult the directory at <http://200.77.230.5/plazasEUA/> or reach out directly to the nearest Mexican Consulate at <https://consulmex.sre.gob.mx/> for further inquiries.

NEW DIRECTIONS OF BILITERACY

Biliteracy landscapes at the border are dynamic and shifting, and educators who are attuned to the particular educational challenges and opportunities of border contexts are uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of the ongoing discussions and debates. Further exploration of more transnational, trans-migratory and *transfronterizo* perspectives on biliteracy could help educators become more familiarized with the ways in which Latinx communities deconstruct and rebuild multi-layered lives, histories, and identities across borders and how they mediate cross-border educational experiences (Levitt, 2009).

The educational model of *Plazas Comunitarias* offers an example of how learning opportunities can be shared across the border and provides a blueprint of how similar interventions could be



leveraged by and for border communities to open up opportunities for biliteracy learning as well as community building and strengthening. However, it is incumbent upon each bordered school district to map the terrain of the different biliteracy resources and grassroots educational initiatives available in their communities to identify those that best attend to their local needs and that at the same time recognize the social, linguistic and cultural complexities and richness of the borderlands.

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