



COLUMN: BILITERACY IN TEXAS

COLUMN EDITOR: MARY AMANDA STEWART

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.

SUPPORTING BILITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTENT AREAS THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: KEEPING IT REAL, RELEVANT, AND RIGOROUS

PATSY SOSA-SANCHEZ



ABSTRACT

There is no other greater opportunity to continue use and strengthen students' funds of knowledge than through the content areas supported with multicultural literature. In this article, the author shares how teachers can use specific texts in their content area teaching.

Keywords: multicultural literature, English learners

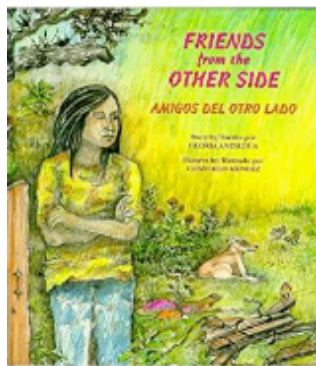
As bilingual, dual language, and ESL teachers, we are always reflecting on how to make our lessons more real, relevant and rigorous for our English Learners (ELs). The state of Texas continues developing exceptional children who are building their biliteracy skills in our bilingual classrooms. Yet we cannot seem to dispel concern for how our students are developing academic language in the content areas. Our approach to bilingual teaching in the classrooms not only needs to be reflective, but should also be intentional, with opportunities to create teachable moments. To teach for successful academic outcomes is of essence as we continue to build the biliterate population that will shape our future socially, academically, and economically.

All students enter the formal educational setting with rich background knowledge. While some educators fail to recognize that all background knowledge is valuable, we must defer to the fact that ELs come to our schools with a wealth of knowledge that they have gained from parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even their friends from across the street. This knowledge makes them cultural experts of their own micro-community, which adds to their funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992).

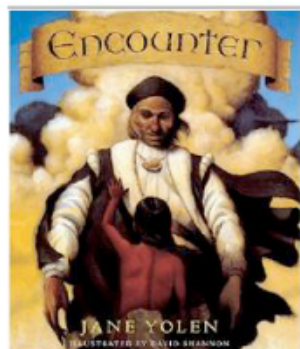
Our ELs have barriers that keep them from receiving real, relevant and rigorous instruction, but that can be overcome by drawing on their funds of knowledge in the classroom. So how do we tap into these funds of knowledge? There is no better place that exists than in a bilingual classroom where ELs can share their personal experiences through conversations. I have found that critical conversations in the classroom encourage inquiry. Moreover, children, like adults, can decipher more information when they talk through things. Their oral language fosters their cognitive processing, allowing them to sharpen their comprehension skills, especially when supported with the use of their native language (Sosa-Sánchez, 2015). The reliving of real life experiences happens in any kind of conversation, whether it is teacher-led or student-led. In turn, ELs exhibit dynamic exchanges of information. The ELs find themselves sharing their home lives, communities, and cultures during conversations. This allows them to value the new knowledge they are gaining in the classrooms, which they are transferring as real from home to school. Consequently, the positive augmentation of language development builds bilingualism and biliteracy. This positive reaction allows the ELs to explore further comprehension of their target language (L2) with the strength of their native language (L1) (Sosa-Sánchez, 2015).



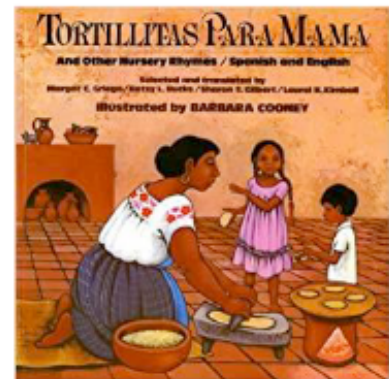
There is no other greater opportunity to continue using and strengthening these funds of knowledge more than through the content areas supported with multicultural literature. When we think of ELs developing literacy, we think about their use of different literary genres, and how this supports their efforts in creating meaning and building comprehension of content concepts. Multicultural literature in any of the content areas allows relevance to boost comprehension (Stewart et al., 2018; Riley & Sosa-Sánchez, 2019). Think about how we learn information as adults. It has to carry some relevance to what we are trying to comprehend. The use of authentic and culturally relevant literature is not a new concept, but requires a thorough understanding of the values and beliefs that are relevant to ELs. The use of children's literature allows our students and teachers to be reflective and validates our students' experiences (Clark et al., 2016). We need to bring in books that provide language support for L1 and L2. We should bring in authentic literature written by authors who have experienced it, felt it, and written it.



This includes authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1992) whose voice exemplifies the human kindness that needs to be unearthed in our country with her craftiness of words in *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado*. Additionally, consider how many times we have heard students talk about helping Mamá make tortillas, and the potential connections students may encounter in Griego et al.'s (1980) depiction of a real-life kitchen in which the reader is almost pushed to dive in and smell the deliciousness and richness of family traditions. What about the



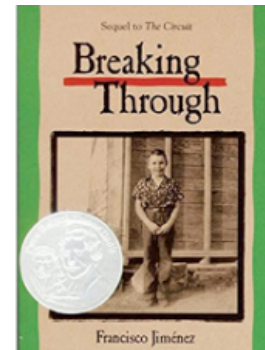
historical depiction of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas in Yolen's (1992) *Encounter*? This story not only provides realness of what two different cultures are experiencing upon Columbus' arrival, but also allows ELs to reflect and respond to how valuable their experiences are to the reconceptualization of new information. The realness and the relevance coupled with content knowledge creates a mosaic of culturally rich pedagogical practices that leaves no EL behind.



Surely, relevant literature is useful in primary classrooms, and it does not need to stop in the lower grades. It is essential in creating meaning and comprehension in the intermediate grades as well as the high school classroom. In an 11th grade high school social studies classroom I observed, students found themselves engaged in a unit of study on immigration. The teacher had never been encouraged to use literature to support content instruction. When the students received Jiménez's



(2001) book *Breaking Through* they found themselves immersed in the images of the characters portrayed in the story. Jiménez's portrayal of his life as a *bracero* and running from *la migra* brought many students a turmoil of feelings, stating they could identify with Francisco and his brother in the story (Sosa-Sánchez & Riley, 2019).



Language use and literacy are essential components in an EL's education. The value of relevant literature is critical as it supports ELs' language development across domains. Conversations, discussions, critical thinking skills, reading, writing, and listening become the focal points of an EL's validity of culture and experience. Teachers can best support this by using literature across the curriculum – using all genres. It allows students to reflect and discuss, validating their experiences and new learning. Teachers can also target instructional needs by reflecting on their delivery of instruction, thus supporting the EL's language events in their L1 or their L2. It supports the student's meaning-making efforts, which will banner academic success in the content areas.

REFERENCES

Clark, E. R., Flores, B. B., Smith, H. L., & González, D. A. (2015). *Multicultural literature for Latino bilingual children: Their words, their worlds*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.

Sosa-Sánchez, P. (2015). English language learners and expository text: A cross-case analysis of reading behaviors using retrospective miscue analysis. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).

Sosa-Sánchez, P., Riley, J. (2019). Breaking through: A literacy lesson for social studies. In H. Hansen-Tomas & M. A. Stewart (Eds.), *Transforming practices for the high school classroom*, (pp. 63-78). TESOL Press.

Stewart, M. A., Walker, K., & Reville, C. (2018). Learning from students: What, why, and how adolescent English learners want to

read and write. *Texas Journal of Literacy Education* 6(1), 23-40.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

CITED

Anzaldúa, G. (1993). *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado*. (C. Mendez, Illus.). Emeryville.

Jiménez, F. (2001). *Breaking through*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Tortillitas para mama and other nursely rhymes. (1981). (B. Cooney, Illus.) (M. C. Griego, B. L. Bucks, S. S. Gilbert, & L. H. Kimball, Trans.). Macmillan.

Yolen, J. (1992). *Encounter*. (D. Shannon, Illus.) Voyager Books.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Patsy Sosa-Sánchez, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Bilingual/ESL at the University of North Texas-Dallas, and serves as the EC-6/Bilingual/ESL Program Coordinator and Assistant Dean for the School of Education. Her areas of research include ELs' reading/writing development in the content areas, ESL and SLA, and L-TELLs (Long-term English Language Learners), as well as professional development for the betterment of dual language methodologies as related to culturally relevant pedagogy. Her email address is Patsy.Sosa-Sanchez@untdallas.edu.