

Situating Literacy-Rich Engagements for Emergent Bilinguals

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ABSTRACT

Camp Sunshine, a summer literacy program for emergent bilingual children ages 4-8, positions bilingualism as an asset. In Camp Sunshine, we strive to create inclusive multilingual spaces that honor children's cultural identities and lived experiences while supporting literacy development. The camp implements a three-pronged approach to literacy engagement: beginning with whole-group interactive read-alouds of carefully selected multicultural picturebooks, followed by small-group re-engagement with key concepts, and culminating in hands-on explorations through art or play-based activities. Through Camp Sunshine, children freely use their full linguistic repertoires, navigating literacy as they engage in translanguaging. This descriptive article presents key insights including strategies to support literacy development like using culturally relevant literature as windows into children's experiences, incorporating sensory-rich experiences, and fostering collaborative relationships between educators. The framework which offers practical applications for educators seeking to create culturally responsive learning environments for emergent bilingual learners.

KEYWORDS

Translanguaging, emergent bilinguals, picturebooks, culturally response literacy, asset-based perspective

Camp Sunshine (all names are pseudonyms), a summer literacy camp for young emergent bilingual children, provides a space for children to freely engage in literacy-rich activities in a joyful and creative atmosphere. We, university researchers and faculty, intentionally designed the camp to position bilingualism as an asset for learning and growth, rather than a deficit. Located on the campus of a university early childhood laboratory school in the southeast, the camp operates for eight, half-day sessions, offering campers

time in large group gatherings and age-defined classes (kindergarten and first grade in one group, second and third grade in another group). Throughout the day, campers, ages four to eight years old, engage in read alouds, art activities, music, dance, center activities, snack time and outdoor play. Within these spaces, campers use whichever language or languages they feel most comfortable within a given context, sometimes engaging in translanguaging as they mix languages seamlessly (García et al., 2017). The dynamic environment at *Camp Sunshine* is busy, noisy, exuberant, and celebrates linguistic diversity.

Camp Sunshine has been serving children and families since 2018. In this descriptive article, we describe the curriculum at large, followed by the specific three-pronged multiliteracy approach implemented in summer 2023. During that year, camp staff included four teachers (two fluent in Spanish and English) and three researchers (university faculty, one bilingual in Spanish and English). Additionally, six bilingual high-school and middle school-aged peer mentors assisted the camp by engaging/playing with the campers and helping to set up and organize classroom spaces. While the summer camp welcomes children ages four through eight years old, this descriptive article will share examples of culturally and linguistically relevant practices with the K-1 group (four through six-year-olds). These practices offer possibilities for educators and caregivers to be used in or beyond classroom contexts that aim to engage and support emergent bilingual learners.

Camp Curriculum

Since 2018, the curriculum of Camp Sunshine has focused on themes of identity that aim to reflect the lived experiences of the campers. Recognizing that language and identity are inextricably intertwined, we designed curriculum around themes like Who Am I? and My Family and My Community. These themes provided opportunities for the children to explore their cultural identities and for us to learn about them, their families, and their cultural and linguistic practices and experiences.

Selecting Children's Books

Anchoring the curricular themes are carefully

selected children's books. These books are the heart of the curriculum. Throughout the years, we have selected books that were 1) published in both Spanish and English versions (translated), 2) written in Spanish and English in the same book (bilingual books), or 3) written in English with Spanish words (translanguage books). Botelho and Marion (2023) recommend the term translanguage books as it draws from the theoretical framework of translanguaging. This variety was intentional to showcase the diverse ways in which people use language. Reyes et al. (2022) discuss the importance of selecting literature that is relevant to the reader's experiences and home culture to encourage their engagement. Therefore, we wanted books to be relevant, culturally responsive, connected to the theme, an appropriate length for a read-aloud for our campers, and high-quality literature that uses rich language and noteworthy illustrations to present complex ideas with which children can grapple. Additionally, we carefully selected books by authors and illustrators with experiences within the community they write about. See Figure 1 for the invaluable resources we have used to find wonderful literature. See Figure 1.

Over time, the camp curriculum has expanded to more fully explore the relationship between languages and identities. For example, in earlier years, books in English and/or Spanish served as means to inquire about self and community. In 2023, the books selected took a deeper dive to look closely at the linguistic experiences of the characters. Books like *Gibberish* (Vo, 2022) and *Drawn Together* (Lê, 2018) portrayed struggles common in the lives of emergent bilingual children, like being misunderstood by peers and teachers or not being able to communicate and connect with a grandparent. While these challenges are real, they only offer a partial (or one) perspective of the complex experience of being bilingual, which is also shaped by joy and love. As such, we also selected stories that explore a comprehensive view of language, and a range of experiences relevant to many emergent bilinguals across contexts. For example, we read *Yo! Yes? Yes?* (Raschka, 1993) to think about the role of non-verbal communication, particularly when meeting someone for the first time. We shared *Luli and the Language of Tea* (Wang & Yum, 2022)

FIGURE 1: Children's Literature Resources

World of Words: Center for Global Literacies and Literatures, out of the University of Arizona, includes: WOW Currents (updated news regarding children's and adolescent literature), WOW Reviews (current book reviews), WOW Stories (vignettes from PK-12 classrooms) and WOW Libros (reviews of Spanish-language books).

Outstanding International Books (OIB) List, sponsored by the United States Board of Books for Young People, includes approximately 40 international books that help children understand the world around them. The OIB website showcases the book covers, links to annotated bibliographies, and links to Teaching Books entries for each book that suggests how to use books in classrooms.

Book awards like Charlotte Huck Award, Pura Belpré Award, Coretta Scott King Award, Asian/Pacific American Award for Children's Literature, American Indian Youth Literature Award, Schneider Family Book Award, John Newbery Medal, and the Caldecott Medal.

about a group of young linguistically and culturally diverse children who rely on play and tea as means for communication, as languages. In addition, we read *A Song of Frutas* (Engle & Palacios, 2021) and *Little Treasures: Terms of Endearments from Around the World* (Ogborn, 2012), which focus on meaningful relationships in bilingual communities. See Figure 2 for the complete list of anchor texts from each Camp Sunshine theme across the years. See Appendix A for the complete list of anchor texts from each Camp Sunshine theme across the years.

Three-Pronged Approach

In 2023, as we designed the curriculum, we were intentional about a three-pronged approach to engage with a specific picture book. First, we introduced the picture book with a whole group interactive read-aloud. Then we moved into smaller groups in different classrooms, where we re-engaged the children with the book. Finally, children explored the experiences in the picture books through art- or play-based engagements.

Introductory Read Aloud

When conducting the whole group read aloud, two teachers took the lead on each book. We scanned the images to display on a Promethean Board so that all children could see the illustrations. Each teacher also had a copy of the book so they could read. Depending on the book, teachers used a variety of strategies to engage the children in the read aloud: use varying voices, alter speed and volume based on what is happening in the story, pause for questions, connections, and other responses, and invite the readers to join in the reading (Kiefer et al., 2023).

At times, the teachers took turns reading by pages and other times they assumed the role of a character, like in *Yo! Yes!* (Rachka, 2007). Other times, the teachers asked questions, creating opportunities for the children to make connections between the books and their lives and to discuss the text with their peers. When sharing books like *Drawn Together* (Lê, 2018) and *Gibberish* (Vo, 2022), they also paused on specific illustrations to give children the time to take in the details, prompt children's thinking by asking targeted questions, and wondering why the illustrator might have selected this design. During the read aloud of *Little Treasures: Endearments from Around the World* (Ongburn, 2012), a global book written in multiple languages, the teachers read aloud in all the languages, and asked questions in either Spanish and English, or sometimes in both languages.

For the teachers and researchers, these introductory read aloud sessions provided crucial context for informing our next steps. As we watched and listened, we asked ourselves:

1. Do the children seem to be enjoying the book?
2. Do they understand the story?
3. What role are multiple languages playing in their experiences with the text?
4. Are they making personal connections?
5. What role are the illustrations playing in their experiences with the text?
6. What kinds of questions are the teachers asking that deepen their understanding and connections to the book?

These guiding questions shaped our understanding of their initial interactions with the story. After

we finished the read-aloud, the whole group split into two smaller groups (according to age), in different classrooms, where children enjoyed a snack before moving into the re-engagement.

Culturally Relevant Re-engagement

In smaller groups, teachers revisited the picture book to re-engage the children with the story and concepts explored in the book. These re-engagements lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and were especially important because they made texts/concepts more accessible to children as we explored and built upon connections between the read aloud and the children's wealth of knowledge, previous educational experiences, conceptual understanding, and language development (Chang et al., 2016). For example, *Drawn Together* (Lê, 2018) uses minimal text to tell the story of a boy who is dropped off for the day at his grandfather's house. They do not share the same spoken language and the illustrations depict their differences and a slight tension as they try to eat together or watch tv. It is only when the boy brings out his art supplies that they begin to connect, as the grandfather is also an artist. With very different styles and materials, they parallel draw until their illustrations begin to interact and morph into something new.

We knew that we needed to spend time unpacking the storyline. When we got back to the small group, one teacher revisited the art in the story, moving fluidly between Spanish and English, while wondering aloud. She asked questions like: 1) How did they know who was drawing? 2) What if the boy and the grandfather couldn't understand each other? and 3) I wonder how they decided what to draw? The teacher turned to a different page and said "Look at all the colors. What do you see here?" as she slowly moved the book around the small group to give each child the opportunity to study the illustration. On another page, she asked the children how the grandfather and grandson looked like they were feeling? When they responded with "happy," the teacher prompted them to think about why they were now happy.

This re-engagement focused on the art, communication, and emotions, as we provided children with "multiple opportunities to hear and use language, emphasizing academic language use and discipline-specific terminology and discourse patterns," (Ortiz et al., 2023, p. 2) which made the pic-

ture book accessible to these young readers. These re-engagements also integrated additional strategies, beyond those mentioned in the Introductory Read Aloud, that encouraged children's engagement, attention, and motivation such as exploring artifacts, engaging with sensory materials, and responding through movement.

Exploration

After children re-engaged with the picture books, they moved into the exploration phase of the literacy experience that were intentionally designed to extend experiences and understanding of the stories. Chang, et. al (2016) noted that opportunities for collaboration benefits bilingual learners as they "use language to construct meaning, show content understanding, and develop language" (p.16). Literature-based exploration builds critical knowledge and understanding, provides opportunities for inquiry that is relative and interesting, and meets the diverse needs of readers, including bilingual learners, as they engage in meaningful ways with texts (Kiefer et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2016; Pappas et al., 2006).

We designed a variety of engagements, arts-based or play-based, to further the children's experiences with the picture book. For example, after reading *Yo! Yes?* (Raschka, 2007), children worked together to brainstorm ideas, movements, and body postures that they could or have used to greet people for the first time. The teachers photographed the children's actions for further discussion around the power of non-verbal communication. After re-engaging with *Drawn Together* (Lê, 2018), children partnered together to paint a picture without using words, like the characters did in the book. Teachers then asked them follow up questions similar to those discussed in the relevant re-engagement. How did you decide what to draw? How did you communicate with each other? Similarly, once the children discussed *Luli and the Language of Tea* (Yang, 2022), they played in pairs without using verbal languages to relate to the experience presented in the story.

As part of the camp experience, it has been important for us to share the children's experiences with their families. Therefore, each year, the children's artistic or multimodal responses to the anchor text are connected to a larger documentation

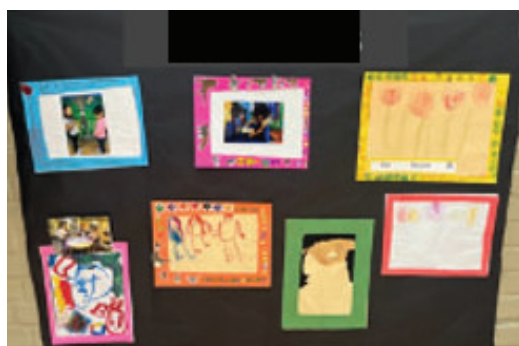
piece centered around a theme. This piece is sent home with the child on the last day of camp. One year, children created a life-size cultural x-ray (Short, 2009) that reflected the daily art-based engagements around prompts like “What do you like to play? What do you know a lot about? Describe your favorite outfit. What is your dream? What questions do you have?” (see Figure 2). In 2023, all explorations contributed to the creation of a portrait wall inspired by Mariana and Her Familia (Mancillas, 2022) capturing children’s responses to prompts such as “Draw a self-portrait. Create a picture of your family. How can you say hi to someone for the first time?” (see Figure3).

FIGURE 2
Emilio’s Self-Portrait



Note. Artifact created in summer 2022.

FIGURE 3
Carmen’s Portrait Wall



Note. Artifacts created during her time at Camp Sunshine in 2023.

We believe that this three-pronged approach created rich opportunities for children to interact with texts and illustrations, deepening their understanding of and appreciation for literature.

Insights from the Three-Pronged Approach in the K-1 Classroom

Our summer camp focused on creating spaces for emergent bilinguals that serve as windows (Sims Bishop, 1990) into the children’s family experiences and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, et al., 2005), particularly those around their linguistic repertoires. These spaces also supported young emergent bilingual children in making sense of the complex picture books we explored during our time together. As educators of young children, we understand the importance and benefits of an interactive read aloud. Last year we were quite comfortable with the Introduction prong of the curriculum. However, we found ourselves digging deeper into the re-engagements and explorations with books, which is the focus of this section. The following strategies allowed teachers and researchers to collaborate and engage children in interpreting and understanding the experiences depicted in the literature. We share insights for creating spaces and opportunities that maximize the linguistic experiences and growth for emergent bilingual children.

Reaching All Children

Teachers demonstrate proficiency in adapting instruction for emergent bilinguals when they ensure that the content is inclusive and comprehensive for all children (Whitacre et al., 2021). At Camp Sunshine, teachers and researchers worked together to ensure children had access to the books by identifying conceptual ideas from the stories that the children could relate to or engage with particularly given the limited time available within the summer camp structure. Much of the negotiation of these ideas developed after the whole camp introductory read aloud, as teachers carefully observed the young campers’ engagement. For example, during the read aloud of *Little Treasures: Endearments from Around the World* (Ogburn, 2011), we noticed that the children had a hard time engaging with the story, possibly because the title is a concept book that offers no storyline. During

our re-engagement with the book, we decided to pay closer attention to Raschka's illustrations and invited the children to mix watercolors to create self-portraits. Excited by the process of comparing their skin tones and mixing paint, the children were also more interested in sharing the names their families called them: *mi amor*, *peque*, *coranzoncito*, *hija*, and name diminutives like *Carlitos* (after Carlos), or *Carmensita* (after Carmen). See Figures 4 and 5.

FIGURE 4
Children Painting



Note. Campers creating the tone that will best match their skin.

FIGURE 5
Sheila's Self-Portrait



Note. Camper's self-portrait using paint that had been mixed to match skin tone.

During the re-engagement of *Drawn Together* (Lê & Santat, 2018) and *Luli and the Language of Tea* (Wang & Yum, 2022), we conducted a partial picture walk to co-retell the stories with the children. We focused on the emotions of the characters at the beginning and end of the story, the role of

drawing and tea as individual but also collective experiences; as languages, and the characters' ability to communicate without speech. For both stories we encouraged the children to "play a game" that consisted of inviting a peer to play without relying on verbal communication. We carefully framed the experience as a game because we wanted to stay away from the loaded implications of silence in an early childhood classroom. As the children played, they naturally communicated with gestures, eye contact, postures, facial expression, and sound effects like "um", "um-huh" or "uh-uh" that allowed them to negotiate their rules and expectations of the play turns. We quickly realized that highlighting non-verbal communication and play as language reached all children because for a few minutes we placed the constant high expectations for expressive language on hold. This game encouraged children to rely on the multimodal nature of play to actively engage in communication and meaning making even with the absence of much oral language (Wohlwend et al., 2022).

Key Words as Windows into Children's Experiences

Camp Sunshine was designed to support emergent bilinguals in English and Spanish. One way teachers assisted children was by highlighting important vocabulary from the stories. These words served as windows into children's linguistic and cultural experiences. Sometimes the book published in English included words in Spanish. For example, while reading *Paletero Man* (Diaz, 2021), Ms. Rosie asked, "does anybody know what the word *vecindad* means?". Other times, the book published in English offered opportunities to highlight cognates, as in *Luli and the Language of Tea* (Wang, 2022) when the teacher explained, "hot water, they're going to make tea, *té*". Similarly, while revisiting *Mariana and Her Familia* (Mencillas, 2022), published in English, the teacher asked in Spanish: ¿Quién tiene primos o primas? When 4-year old Valentina responded "I got three primas, and that's what they're called, because in Spanish primas", her translingual response showed that she can distinguish and understand both languages and she is also deeply aware of her bilingual and bi-cultural identities, and the pragmatics of languages as she explains why her primas are called (or must

be called) primas instead of cousins. During this same interaction we learned that her abuelita Celia lives in Mexico and as she stated, “I come from Mexico”.

However, in 2023, Camp Sunshine welcomed Alice, a young emergent bilingual fluent in English and Mandarin, the latter being a language unfamiliar to teachers, researchers, and the rest of the children. Therefore, we highlighted words in English, Spanish and Mandarin. Since only Alice knew Mandarin, we integrated questions about Mandarin in broader conversations about other languages and countries to avoid unintentionally signaling her as a token for her home language or her Chinese cultural background. For example, while discussing Luli and the Language of Tea (Wang, 2022), the teachers made several comments related to multilingualism and asked several questions about countries of origin. One of the comments informally prompted Alice for confirmation, “I asked Alice’s parents how they say hello in their language and they said *nǐ hǎo*”, to which she quickly responded “right!”. In a similar interaction, the children had identified a bridge in the illustrations of *Drawn Together* (Lê, 2018). At that moment, the teacher provided the Spanish translation *punte*, and asked the group, “Do we know how to call this (while signaling the bridge) in Mandarin?” Alice responded, *Qiáo*.

We comfortably supported emergent bilinguals in English and Spanish. However, when working with Alice, we appreciated statements reassuring that “Monolingual teachers are just as able as bilingual or multilingual teachers to enact a translanguaging pedagogy” (Brown, 2021, p. 143). In the future, as we welcome emergent bilinguals in languages other than Spanish, we will integrate additional strategies like translating the title of the book; learning key words of phrases that can facilitate transitions or daily routines; conducting the introductory read aloud in English, followed by the re-engagement in Spanish; inviting family members to read or sing in their home language; creating labels in the various summer camp spaces to signal key materials and areas; and, using technology such as Google Translate or artificial intelligence like ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2022) to understand the children but also for them to create meaning. Even though our camp is short, we can still be co-learn-

ers with the children and provide time and space for them to engage in translanguage spaces (Brown, 2021).

Finally, while many of our interactions with children were initiated in English, except with a few children who showed preference for Spanish, the camp itself started each morning with *Hola, ¿qué tal?* (Super Simple Español, 2018), a Spanish children’s song that integrates body movements such as *aplaudir*, *zapaterar*, *estirar*, *agachar*, *dar la vuelta* y *saludar*. Similarly, camp ended with *Adiós, adiós* (Super Simple Español, 2018). This shorter Spanish song emphasized *aplaudir* and *zapatear* as part of its contagious lyrics. Our hope with the strategies presented in this section was to create humanizing spaces that validate children’s bilingual and bicultural identities as they build incidentally upon their linguistic repertoires.

Sensory-Based Experiences

Sensory-rich play is known to support children’s brain development and memory (Gascoyne, 2011). Experiences with sensory materials can bring learning to life. The unstructured quality of sensory-rich play, where there’s no set right or wrong approach, offers an inclusive learning environment ripe for fostering problem-solving, exploration, and creativity. Sometimes we integrated sensory-based experiences as means to create windows into children’s family stories. For example, while revisiting Mariana and Her Familia (Mancillas, 2022) we invited the children to use their hands to mimic movements made when flattening Mexican tortillas.

Other times the sensory materials allowed us to plan multimodal experiences to create meaningful entry points to connect with the story. While listening to *A Song of Frutas* (Engle, 2021), we noticed the younger campers’ excitement for sharing stories about grandparents living in Mexico, El Salvador and the U.S., as well as fruits that they enjoyed eating or sharing with family. Following our observations, during the re-engagement with the story, we invited children to share about their favorite fruits and explored these words in Spanish, English, and Mandarin. Aware of the importance of offering multiple means for engagement and expression (Whitacre et al., 2021) we also incorporated Play-Doh to encourage children to create the

fruits we explored to foster attention, conceptual understanding, and fine motor skills.

Similarly, while reengaging with *Luli and the Language of Tea* (Wang, 2022) children and teachers recreated the tea party scene from the book and built a structure with magnetic tiles using nonverbal communication to share similar experiences as the characters in the book. The different materials allowed children to reenter the story world with artifacts that were relevant to their previous experiences and supportive of their cognitive and physical development.

Educators and Researchers as Co-Teachers

Establishing respectful and collaborative relationships among adults in a classroom is crucial for creating supportive learning environments for children. At Camp Sunshine, teachers and researchers collaborated as partners, appreciating and building upon each other's expertise. Following Juuti et al., (2021)'s recommendation, we made an effort to ensure that everyone felt confident that their ideas and concerns would be listened to, and that feedback would be helpful.

As expected, we started each day with a lesson plan. However, as each day unfolded, we observed, listened, and revised our lessons to support the children's experiences with the texts. Central to this revising process was the collaboration between teachers and researchers. Sometimes, researchers observed aspects during the introductory read-aloud (led by teachers) and shared their findings with the teachers; together they negotiated revisions for the re-engagement plans. For example, after observing the children during the read aloud of *Gibberish* (Vo, 2020), teachers and researchers noticed that one key experience from the book to highlight during the re-engagement could be the practice of building vocabulary through images (pictures) and repetition as depicted in the excerpt where Dat and Julie rely on drawings to help Dat learn words in English. To mediate this learning experience Ms. Rivera recommended artifacts based on her vast knowledge of preschool classrooms, young children's interests, and Spanish/English cognates that could support emergent bilinguals. Some of the items named in English, Spanish, and Mandarin included: a toy crocodile (cocodrilo), a rubber school bus, plastic cup of rice, a rose (rosa), among others. After this collective engagement,

each child selected an item from the classroom to draw and label in different languages. See Figures 6 and 7.

FIGURE 6

Antonio's Butterfly



FIGURE 7

Alice's Apple



Once again, after careful observation of the children during the introductory read aloud of *Mariana and Her Familia* (Mancillas & Meza, 2022), teachers and researchers decided to highlight the role of family pictures across places like home, school, or on a phone, as illustrated in the grandmother's wall of family pictures. With this idea in mind, Ms. Rivera invited the children to explore the wall of pictures of children and their families who attended that classroom during the academic year. This reference helped children notice that children and families can belong to many spaces, while creating a space for them to become familiar with a space that was new to everyone exc-

cept Ms. Rivera. This process of revising and rethinking together allowed us to engage in flexible thinking as we capitalized on one another's perspectives and expertise.

Over the Camp Sunshine years, teachers and researchers have also exchanged general impressions regarding children's responses to the overall structure of the summer camp. These observations have prompted significant discussions about scheduling and the intentions behind each routine. For example, in previous years, snack time (scheduled between the introductory read aloud and the re-engagement with the text) was utilized as a space where teachers and researchers continued conversations about the story. After noticing children actively changing the topic of conversation or remaining quiet to the prompts, the adults decided to rethink how we structured this time. In 2023, rather than asking reading comprehension questions during snack, the children ate, talked, and laughed in child-led interactions. The first day, we worried that the break would result in campers disconnecting from the story. Instead, we found the opposite. This time provided children with the space and time to process what they had heard and seen in the Introduction. In fact, we found that this transition provided a necessary disruption from the more intense focused thought required during the read aloud and the subsequent re-engagement with the story; a time to slow down and honor the flexible nature of summer camps.

Conclusion

Focusing on ways to create engaging literacy experiences for emergent bilingual children, that are anchored by high quality children's literature, we believe the three-pronged approach described here is critical. When all three prongs of the approach are employed, bilingual children are provided multiple opportunities to connect with the text and engage in playful meaning making. Additionally, finding ways to reach all children, highlighting words that helped us learn a little bit more about the children, incorporating sensory-based play experiences, and engaging in collaborative and respectful relationships between teachers and researchers, were also pivotal to the camp experience. We argue that these tenets are valuable for

ALL learning environments for ALL children. Our hope is that more children will benefit from the experiences we have so fortunately shared and the lessons we have learned at Camp Sunshine.

"This time provided children with the space and time to process what they had heard and seen."

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