

Creating Inclusive Multilingual Spaces: A Literature-Based Framework for Supporting Young Emergent Bilinguals

A Research to Practice Summary

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ABSTRACT

This research to practice manuscript describes a summer literacy program designed to support emergent bilingual children ages 4 through 8 through a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse practices. Children engaged in literature-based activities, including read-alouds, art, music, and play, within an inclusive environment that celebrated bilingualism as an asset. The program used high-quality picturebooks to implement a three-pronged approach: interactive read-alouds, culturally relevant small-group re-engagements, and hands-on explorations. Findings underscore the importance of sensory-rich, play-based experiences, intentional collaboration among educators, and the strategic use of bilingual and translanguage picturebooks to foster meaningful connections and language development.

KEYWORDS

translanguaging, biliteracy, asset-based, picturebooks, strategies

This study explored Camp Sunshine (pseudonym), a summer literacy program designed for emergent bilingual children ages 4-8. The camp celebrates linguistic diversity and positions bilingualism as an asset, emphasizing the value of children's home languages. Over the course of eight half-day sessions, children participated in a variety of literature-based activities, including read-alouds, art, music, dance, and center-based learning, as well as snack time and outdoor play. Mixed-age groups were organized with kindergarteners and first graders together, and second and third graders in another cohort. Within these spaces, campers use whichever language or languages with which they feel most comfortable within a given context, sometimes engaging in translanguaging as they navigate their linguistic repertoire (García et al., 2017). The program was staffed by bilingual teachers, researchers, and peer mentors, offering a rich, collaborative space for linguistic and cultural exploration

in an inclusive and supportive environment.

This article begins with a summary of the literature that serves as the foundation for our work. Next, we describe our three-pronged approach, designed to create relevant experiences with picture-books, that supports children in capitalizing on and utilizing biliteracy to make meaning. Finally, we share insights for early childhood teachers who want to support children in utilizing their bi/multilingualism to make meaning of texts.

Summary of the Literature

The body of literature described below provides the theoretical foundation to our approach to supporting emergent bilingual children through culturally responsive literature-based experiences. Specifically, we explore an asset-based perspective of bi/multilingualism (persons speaking two or more languages), instructional practices that support bi/multilingual language development, and intentional literature selection to support literacy growth for young bi/multilingual learners.

Bi/multilingualism as an Asset

Our work is built upon the belief that we must recognize bi/multilingualism as an asset in educational settings. Traditionally, bi/multilingualism has been viewed through a deficit lens, emphasizing challenges rather than advantages. However, recent studies advocate for a shift towards recognizing the strengths and benefits of bilingualism (Soto-Boykin et al. 2021). This shift is crucial for ensuring that bilingual learners receive the support they need to thrive academically. Furthermore, the role of families and educators in supporting bilingual learners is critical. Research shows that when teachers and parents view bilingualism as a strength, it positively impacts children's language development (Zhang & Jiang, 2024). Teachers who engage with families and leverage their linguistic resources can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This approach not only benefits language acquisition but also supports the development of a positive academic identity among young bilingual learners.

When young bi/multilingual learners are placed in classrooms that view their languages from an asset perspective, educators in those classrooms

embrace translanguaging. Garcia et al. (2017) describe the concept of translanguaging, the practice of naturally and meaningfully moving between languages. In translanguaging, children's language development is strengthened through their flexible use of language as they seamlessly navigate multiple languages, showing command of linguistic features. Noting that language is inextricably bound with identity (Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee, 2017; Kim, 2003), we also draw from González et al.'s (2005) research on funds of knowledge, which describes how connecting to children's cultural identities (including language) and family experiences support academic learning and positive identity development.

Instructional Practices

Research emphasizes the importance of providing ample opportunities for children to interact with language, develop academic language skills, and engage with content-specific vocabulary in multiple languages (Chang et al., 2016; Gascoyne, 2011; Whitacre et al., 2021). Some examples of instruction using best practices for emergent bilingual learners include collaborative learning and building upon children's prior knowledge and lived experiences. Additionally, when teachers consider how to enhance both language development and content knowledge, they ensure that children have opportunities to interact with language in both contexts (Ortiz et al., 2023). We also drew from Gascoyne's (2011) research that sensory-based learning supports brain development and memory formation in young children, especially for emergent bilingual children developing their linguistic skills in multiple languages. Therefore, planning for unstructured sensory experiences to create inclusive learning environments supports creativity and problem-solving. Overall, research indicates that successful instruction for emergent bilinguals must intentionally create spaces that value and support multiple languages, while providing rich opportunities for language development in all languages.

Literature Selection

Intentional literature selection is vital when working with emergent bilingual children. Children need to have access to literature that connects to their lived experiences and home cultures (Botelho

& Marion, 2023; Reyes et al., 2022; Sims Bishop, 1990). When children are able to make connections to literature, to “see” themselves, they have deeper and richer experiences with the literature. As we considered what literature to use in Camp Sunshine, we drew from three different types of books: 1) *translated books* published in both languages as separate translations; 2) *bilingual books* that include both languages in the same text; and 3) *translanguage books* that naturally integrate words from another language into the text. Drawing from these types of books honors children’s linguistic capabilities and provides access to texts through multiple languages.

A Three-Pronged Approach for Literacy Engagement

Daily, Camp Sunshine implemented a three-pronged approach for literacy engagement. First, a picturebook was introduced in a whole group interactive read-aloud. Then, a small group participated in re-engagement focused on content or story elements. Finally, the third prong incorporated hands-on explorations of the text through art and/or play-based activities.

The First Prong: Read-Aloud

Beginning with a whole-group interactive read aloud, teachers used strategies to engage bilingual learners with the text and develop comprehension. By projecting the book on a large TV screen, students viewed the illustrations as teachers used a range of read-aloud skills like varied voices, speeds, and volumes (Kiefer et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers used strategies like pausing for questions, encouraging children’s interactions with the text, through shared connections or responses, or getting in the role of a character to enhance the read-aloud experience.

The Second Prong: Culturally Relevant Re-engagement

After the whole group read-aloud, campers gathered into age-based small groups and took a break for snack and informal conversation. Then teachers revisited key aspects of the story, or themes or concepts, that further developed campers engagement with and comprehension of the story.

These reengagements incorporated both Spanish and English, integrated movement, and used sensory materials to deepen children’s understanding. They also included questions about the illustrations and/or text, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the picturebook. Our focus during this time was to make the texts/concepts more accessible to the children by drawing upon their experiences and linguistic resources to support meaningful connections to the book.

The Third Prong: Exploration

Once children re-engaged with the picturebook, they moved into a space where they explored the story’s concepts through curated art or play-based activities. These literature-based explorations provided relative and interesting opportunities for inquiry, built on knowledge and understanding, and met diverse needs of bilingual readers as they meaningfully explored picturebooks (Chang et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2023; Pappas et al., 2006). For example, children painted together, created collages using items found on a nature walk, or reenacted parts of the story. Through hands-on exploration, children used multiple modes of expression to demonstrate their understanding through a variety of experiences.

Insights

Our summer camp focused on creating spaces for emergent bilinguals that reflected the children’s linguistic identities and family experiences. We supported the young learners in making sense of complex picturebooks using the three-pronged approach and through our work, we learned important lessons. In the following sections, we share insights for creating spaces and opportunities that maximize supportive linguistic experiences for emergent bilingual children.

Embracing Bilingualism

A key component of Camp Sunshine was an inclusive environment that welcomed, respected, and utilized multiple languages in the classroom. Labels and materials were in Spanish and English. We selected books, songs, and activities that honored cultural and linguistic differences. Children were encouraged to use their preferred language(s)

& throughout the day in ways that felt authentic and natural to them.

Selecting Picturebooks and Strategies for Meaning-Making

As we prepared for Camp, we intentionally selected bilingual, translated, and translanguage picturebooks so that children interacted with multiple languages throughout their literacy experiences. These books often told culturally relevant stories to which children could make text-to-self or text-to-world connections. Additionally, we selected books with outstanding illustrations that aided comprehension, lengths that were appropriate for the ages, and authors and/or illustrators who are members of the communities about which they write about. These considerations were important to us to ensure that children engaged with the picturebooks. In addition to carefully curated picturebooks, teachers utilized strategies to aid comprehension in multiple languages. Some strategies included gesturing, questioning in both Spanish and English, highlighting key vocabulary, incorporating music and movement, and providing wait time for students to process questions and form responses. By varying their approach to foster language development, teachers created meaningful and playful ways for children to flexibly interact with the language.

Sensory-Based Experiences

Our time in Camp Sunshine illuminated the importance of utilizing sensory-rich experiences in supporting emergent bilingual learners. We intentionally implemented art and play-based activities that enabled children to connect to stories in unique and meaningful ways. Movement and dramatization activities often reinforced concepts. Dramatic play and manipulatives helped children engage with concepts in concrete ways that support both language development and content understanding.

“Camp Sunshine illuminated the importance of utilizing sensory-rich experiences in supporting emergent bilingual learners.”

Teachers as Collaborators

The final finding from Camp Sunshine is the importance of collaboration between colleagues, which increases student learning (Juuti et al., 2021). Our approach built on respecting each other's expertise and ensuring all voices were heard when providing feedback. While we started with planned lessons, we maintained flexibility through an iterative process where we frequently observed children's responses, discussed observations together, and made collaborative revisions to better support children's learning experiences. Overall, we leveraged one another's perspectives and expertise to plan and implement a supportive learning environment for the camp's emergent bilingual learners.

Suggestions for Practice

As you are considering how best to implement some of these culturally responsive practices that support emergent bi/multilingual students in learning environments, we encourage you to start small, create meaningful experiences, and support language.

Start Small

What is manageable for you in this particular setting at this particular time? Maybe it is finding one or two high-quality bilingual books or finding songs in the home languages of your students. Maybe it's implementing the three-pronged approach with one of your favorite picturebooks that you regularly read in your classroom. Maybe it's adding multiple languages to labels around your classroom. Take that first step.

Create Meaningful Experiences

What will be meaningful and valuable for your students? Do they like to move their bodies? Perhaps engage them in activities that allow them to move their bodies to create meaning of the text. Do they like art? Then create art experiences that support them in making sense of the story. Do they enjoy hands-on activities? Are they particularly interested in interacting with their peers? Use their passions to guide your decision-making in which strategies to use to help them fall more deeply into and connect with picturebooks. Additionally, study

your daily schedule and capitalize on opportunities to provide for natural conversations in multiple languages. Slow things down as much as possible. How might you incorporate providing more time for children to process and respond within a very demanding schedule?

Position Bi/Multilingualism as Assets

Valuing children's bilingualism is imperative to expanding their linguistic repertoires. What does this look like in your educational setting? Might you learn key words in children's home languages or partner with families to learn important phrases? How might technology tools like translation apps help you? What visuals might you create for common routines that might support bi/multilingual learners? Most importantly, how might you create spaces where bi/multilingual children feel confident and safe to explore language and communicate freely?

Small steps in incorporating effective strategies make a big difference in supporting emergent bilingual children's learning and development. Start with what feels right and manageable. Then, step-by-step, expand your multilingual and culturally responsive practices.