

Topics, Texts, and Translanguaging: Centering the Voices and Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Students



By Carla España and Luz Yadira Herrera

As teachers and students prepare for the new beginnings that a school year brings or the return to in-person learning after months of virtual learning, the experiences for bilingual and multilingual Latinx children sometimes make it feel as if every single day is a new day.

Carla's childhood was marked by a disparity between Saturday school in Spanish and English-only schooling during the week. This language separation in the school buildings was a stark difference compared to the dynamic language practices at home and in the community. These further compounded the anxiety that Carla felt from living undocumented in New York City and away from extended family in Chile.

For Luz, navigating an English-only educational policy in California made it difficult to feel success in school. This only heightened the vast disconnect between home and school, which created a frustrating and confusing experience. Our journeys are a constant reminder of how educators can help shape the lives of children and how children and their families can be deeply impacted by state and federal policies but often have no real space to process or confront these.

The bilingual Latinx experience is not a monolith; there isn't one way to define Latinx identities. The history and present reality of Latinx groups in the United States continue to be marked by colonization and disregard for the humanity of Black and brown children. Whether we teach new students from Puerto Rico, whose island has needed much support after hurricanes and earthquakes; Central American students, who might be unaccompanied and undocumented migrants seeking safety and refuge; or Latinx children in California, who are transitioning away from schooling

that previously banned bilingual education under Proposition 227, it is our responsibility as educators to create more humanizing teaching and learning experiences.

Centering the voices and experiences of bilingual and multilingual Latinx children requires a sustained and meaningful shift in an ideological and pedagogical stance. We must decenter the white, middle-class norms of language and cultural practices.

We recommend these practices:

- Get to know our students' journeys.
- Understand our students' language practices across different contexts.
- Understand our students' (and their families') traditions of literacies.
- Affirm, be in solidarity with, and help create awareness of our students' language practices.
- See the connections between school and government policies and their direct effects on our students' lives.
- Understand that our students live in the intersections of many cultural practices and identities.

This kind of work and this type of shift are meant to be ongoing and sustained throughout our teaching careers. We need to reflect, learn, and grow throughout. With this in mind, we developed a critical bilingual literacies approach to support educators in enacting an ideological and pedagogical stance and practice that centers the voices and experiences of bilingual Latinx students.

A Critical Bilingual Literacies Approach

A critical bilingual literacies approach (España and Herrera 2020) considers four key principles to support us in implementing those practices. These four principles are informed by the work of critical education scholars: Wayne Au, Paulo Freire, Nelson Flores, Ofelia García, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Ernest Morrell, Django Paris, Jonathan Rosa, and Angela Valenzuela. To provide learning experiences that will help our bilingual Latinx children thrive, we must construct an educational narrative that places their lives and experiences at the forefront of curriculum design and implementation. These are necessary in bilingual and monolingual learning spaces.



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Self-Reflection

We must all engage in constant self-reflection about our language ideologies, identities, and cultural formations/transformations. Assimilationist educational practices are pervasive, from monolingual and monocultural curriculum to professional development offerings—for example, enforcing strict language separation policies as seen in the “Today we speak in English” or “Today we speak in Spanish” signs used in bilingual dual language classrooms, which sees students as “two monolinguals in one” (Grosjean 2012) (an English speaker and a Spanish speaker separately) instead of dynamic language users. We must be vigilant, constantly reflecting on narratives about linguistic expression, literacies, and Latinx identities, especially how these might be framed against whiteness as the goal or norm for existence. Consider the following questions with colleagues in a study group or on your own:

- What language practices make up our linguistic repertoire? What are the narratives, terms, and beliefs I hold about bilingual and multilingual learners in my classroom?
- We can also map out our own circle of identities (Ahmed 2018). How might these intersect? Which of these identities are privileged (Cauhtin et al. 2019)?

“Unlearning” Linguistic Supremacy

The language practices of students of color have been widely taken up (and appropriated) in mainstream culture but are often seen as a deficit in schools. A common place we find this is in the “social” versus “academic” language narrative, such as vocabulary lists and lesson plan objectives, where the written and spoken language practices of bilingual Latinx children are policed, measured against the standard of the white, listening speaker (Flores and Rosa 2015). Instead, Nelson Flores (2019) calls for “language architecture” as an alternative framework where we build across students’ language repertoires.

- How do we perceive the language practices of students of color versus white, monolingual students?
- How can our teaching methods and curriculum undo a monolingual, English-only focus?

Analyzing Linguistic Practices, Literacies, and Power

We must also consider the literacy practices that are encouraged in the curriculum as we get to know our students and their families’ multiple literacies. This work lives in curriculum planning and teacher study groups as well as in the instruction with children engaging these topics.

- What do we know about the multiple literacies of bilingual and multilingual Latinx children? How can we learn more about them?
- What do we know about the students’ families’ multiple literacies? How are we connecting with community-based organizations, spaces, and partners to grow this knowledge?

Celebrating Bilingual Latinx Linguistic Practices

To celebrate the voices and experiences of bilingual and multilingual Latinx children, we must plan with texts and curricula that view modes of writing, speaking, reading, and listening from the perspective of the bilingual/multilingual learner. This includes bilingual and multilingual texts and welcoming translanguaging spaces in class conversations as well as written drafts and final products.

- What do our writing celebrations look like in the classroom?
- How do these celebrations reflect the varied linguistic landscapes of children’s lives?

A Framework for Lesson Planning: Topic, Texts, Translanguaging

It is crucial that we consider how our teaching methods reflect current understandings from research about bilingual and multilingual Latinx children. We recommend a framework that organizes lessons by a topic that sustains “the cultural ways of being” (Paris 2012, 93) of bilingual Latinx students, bilingual texts, and integrating a translanguaging pedagogy that builds on a knowledge of students’ translanguaging practices.

We use the term translanguaging to refer to the linguistic practices of bilinguals and multilinguals, an approach to teaching, and a means for social justice (García and Leiva 2014) that validates the linguistic practices of children. What does an approach that considers translanguaging and thoughtful text and topic selection look like for teaching bilingual and multilingual Latinx students? We give a brief overview of two sample lesson sequences.

SAMPLE LESSON SEQUENCE 1

Taking an Informed Stance Against Injustice

This sequence of lessons creates an opportunity to engage students in deep conversation and learn about any social justice issue that the students and the school community care about. Most importantly, it can provide both students and educators with a sense of agency and advocacy to bring about heightened awareness to important issues and, where possible, meaningful change.

LESSON 1	LESSON 2	LESSON 3	LESSON 4
Hearing and sharing personal narratives	Deepening our understanding with primary and secondary sources	Researching policies	Countering a harmful narrative

TOPIC

The Plight of Unaccompanied Minors from Central America to the U.S.: Deepening Our Understanding with Primary and Secondary Sources

TEXTS

We recommend choosing varied, multimodal texts.

- YouTube video: “Unaccompanied Children Mayeli, Dulce, and Saul Testify Before Congress”
- Newsela article: “Teen Who Migrated to U.S. Border to Escape Gangs Hopes to Join His Mom”
- *The New York Times* article: “U.S. Detains Record Number of Child Migrants, Surpassing Crisis Under Obama”
- NPR article and audio: “Many Unaccompanied Minors No Longer Alone, But Still in Limbo”
- Book: *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*, edited by Steven Mayers and Jonathan Freedman (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019)
- Cartoon: comicallyincorrect.com

TRANSLANGUAGING

- Students have access to bilingual/multilingual multimodal texts.
- Students annotate, conduct pair-shares, and write/present using their entire linguistic repertoire.
- Students have access to translation tools.

Teaching and learning in this way take more than choosing relevant topics and curating a diverse text list; it takes truly considering the lives of bilingual Latinx children. Teaching can only be transformative if we are continuously holding one another accountable as we advocate with and for bilingual and multilingual Latinx students. It is our responsibility to do the difficult and sustained work of engaging in constant self-reflection and conversations around the pervasiveness of whiteness as the norm. We consider the lived experiences of the community, how students self-identify, and the dynamic ways they employ features of languages to tell their stories and to take informed stances against injustices. En comunidad y en solidaridad, we can reimagine these learning spaces and remove the boundaries and hierarchies around language and identities. We can embrace the humanity of all bilingual and multilingual children and make that the driving force in our teaching.

SAMPLE LESSON SEQUENCE 2

Telling Our Stories

In this sequence of three lessons, we think about text selection, what our readings in community sound like (Is it mostly teacher voice all in English or a full chorus of participation reflecting translanguaging?), and how students' and families' stories (with permission) can also be considered part of the classroom library.

LESSON 1	LESSON 2	LESSON 3
Reading stories from Latinx mentor authors	Writing our own stories	Learning more from family and friends' stories

TOPIC Reading and Creating Our Stories with Latinx Mentor Texts

TEXTS

We recommend using bilingual texts or texts that have been translated. For example, for a sequence of lessons to highlight journeys, names, family connections, and language practices:

- *Soñadores* by Yuyi Morales (New York: Neal Porter Books, 2018)
- *Alma y cómo obtuvo su nombre* by Juana Martínez-Neal (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2018)
- *Mango, Abuela y yo* by Meg Medina (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2015)

TRANSLANGUAGING

- Have the texts available in different languages.
- Encourage and support a study of the language practices in the texts.
- Create a translanguaging space where students can use their entire linguistic repertoire to discuss the texts, take notes, and plan interview questions.

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