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Recommended Citation

Abraham, S. (2012). Critical biliteracy in the ESOL classroom: Bringing the outside in with dual language mentor texts. *TESOL: Bilingual Basics Newsletter*.

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MARCH 2012

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Bilingual Basics

The Newsletter of the *Bilingual-Multilingual Education Interest Section (B-MEIS)*

ARTICLES

CRITICAL BILITERACY IN THE ESOL CLASSROOM: BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN WITH DUAL-LANGUAGE MENTOR TEXTS

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Continually, U.S. societal discourses devalue and silence languages other than standard English. If one can say “I am my language,” as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 81) did, then including multiple languages brings more people into a discourse that opens possibilities for social change. As a teacher of emerging bilingual students, I acted on this principle by embracing the home language of my students, Spanish, to create a space where students could use a wider range of their linguistic repertoire. I sought to create a critical multilingual space where students could bring their cultural and linguistic knowledge into the classroom to deconstruct oppressive ideologies circulated in societal and school discourses concerning speakers of languages other than English (Shor, 2009). These ideologies regarding bilinguals and bilingualism often position the bilingual as one unwilling to speak the dominant the language, inferior to the monolingual speaker, and academically behind monolingual peers. Throughout the 2009-2010 academic period, the students in my ESOL classroom disrupted these deficit positions partly through their use of Spanish in a space where English was typically the only language used and valued.

In 2009-2010, I taught fifth grade in a public, K-5, elementary school in North Georgia. In addition, I taught one 50-minute segment of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). During this ESOL segment, I had nine fifth graders who all spoke English and Spanish and who had family and cultural connections to Mexico. In the school, there was a mismatch between the evidence found in educational research and the practices of ESOL instruction. Despite research (August & Shanahan, 2006; Dworin, 2003; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) showing the benefits of emerging bilingual students

having literacy in their home languages, these students did not receive instruction in Spanish. Scholars of language education (Cummins, 2001; Garcia, 2009) and empirical studies (Dworin, 2006; Manyak, 2006) have shown that language ideologies, such as U.S. English-only initiatives, promote social and educational hegemony by attempting to normalize society through the acquisition and use of a single language. This hegemony, however, still permeated the instruction of the emerging bilinguals in my school. To create a critical multilingual space, I decided to “bring the outside in” in order to “interrupt . . . classroom discourse[s]” that continued to marginalize and remove people and their language from the dominant discourse (Baynam, 2006, p. 25). To bring the outside in, I approached my students about writing in both of their languages, Spanish and English, and using their personal connections and experiences as the basis for reading and writing.

DUAL-LANGUAGE MENTOR TEXTS

Initially, when I introduced the idea of reading and writing in Spanish, as well as English, the seven students who had received English-only instruction since kindergarten were afraid and reluctant to write in Spanish. However, two girls, who were recent Mexican immigrants and Spanish-dominant, seemed comforted by the option to write in Spanish, but they still worried about the correctness of their English writing. My efforts to tell the students “Mistakes are fine! Spelling doesn’t matter!” and my insistence that “Writing is a process, and it’s never perfect the first time!” were not received well by the students. So I turned to dual-language books and mentor texts (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) as writing models for sentence structure and story elements such as theme, perspective, plot, setting, and word choice. I modeled using a dual-language book as a mentor text, and I showed the students how I have struggled with Spanish literacy. I took this moment to illustrate how a dual-language mentor text, *Super Oscar* (De La Hoya & Shulman, 2006), helped me write a personal narrative in English and Spanish. I began by reading a section from my mentor text:

On Saturdays in Oscar’s neighborhood, everyone got together for a picnic in the park. People brought all sorts of food and there were games to play.

Los sábados, en el barrio de Oscar todo el mundo se reunía para un gran picnic en el parque. Los vecinos traían todo tipo de comidas así como muchos juegos y diversiones (pp. 7-8).

Then, I explained my writing process to the students. First, I wrote in English using the sentence structure and some of the vocabulary from the mentor text, and then I did the same in Spanish, or at least as much as I could without an English/Spanish dictionary:

On Saturdays, at Stephanie’s trailer on the farm, everyone worked in the chicken house and played on the farm. Mama and Daddy worked in the garden. Stephanie fed the horses, and Matthew played army.

Los sábados, a remolque de Stephanie en la granja, todo el mundo trabajaba en la casa de pollo y jugó en la granja. Mamá y papá trabajaba en el jardín. Stephanie alimentados a los caballos, y Mateo jugó ejército.

Some of my grammar and vocabulary choices were incorrect in Spanish, but I hoped that the students, as more advanced Spanish speakers, could help me correct and revise the sentences. Initially, they laughed at some of my mistakes, but a discussion of how to translate *trailer* into Spanish led to a critical discussion of homophones, word-for-word translation, and translation for meaning. This process showed my writing weaknesses and vulnerabilities in my nondominant language and demonstrated that the writing process does not begin perfectly. Most important, the process led the students to look at dual-language mentor texts as a way to scaffold their writing, relieve writing anxiety, and generate writing topics. After this, the students began to embrace dual-language writing with a dual-language text as their mentor.

Soon after modeling how to use dual-language mentor texts, I read the poem "My Name Is Jorge" (Medina, 2004) aloud to the students. Maria had a personal connection to the theme of the poem, and she shared that sometimes English monolinguals call her Mary, and it bothered her when her name was not said correctly. However, other students voiced that both the Spanish and English pronunciations of their names were acceptable to them, and a couple of students adamantly wanted only the English pronunciation of their name. At this moment, "bringing the outside in" challenged my belief that I should always use the Spanish pronunciation for students' names. I came away with the idea that I can respect students by embracing how they prefer to name themselves and it was not my place to impose cultural or linguistic heritage. Maria wrote a poem that brought her experiences with names into the classroom:

My ugly name Mary\Mi nombre feo Mary

My name is Maria.

Mi nombre es María.

I know that my name is Maria.

Se que mi nombre es María.

But everybody calls me Marry.

Pero todos me llaman Meri.

What an ugly sound.

¡Qué feo sonido!

Like if I am getting married.

Como si me casara

The worst of all was that a boy called me Married

Y lo peor de todo es que hoy en la mañana un niño me llamo MERI

And I did not want to turn my head around

y volteé la cabeza.

Because I do not want to get

No quiero estar

Married???

CASADA???

In addition, Maria demonstrated and extended her understanding of the way the original poem uses homophones and rhyme across languages. For example, in the mentor text, Jorge was pronounced George, which sounded like a sneeze to the young boy named Jorge. Maria explored how the same sound may invoke various meanings depending on the person's linguistic and cultural background. Her poem demonstrated a tension that she had experienced concerning her name in a discourse that overwhelmingly values monolingualism.

Lalo used *Los Gatos Black on Halloween* (Morales & Montes, 2006), a book written in Spanglish verse, as his guide for a Spanglish text about the Day of the Dead. During his writing process, I noticed that he did not know or understand rhyme scheme, so together we identified the rhyme scheme of his mentor text. Immediately, he wanted to use a rhyme scheme in his story as well. He went to his peers for help to find rhyming English words, Spanish words, and even rhyming words between English and Spanish. With his peers, mentor text, and dictionary, he wrote seven stanzas with an identifiable rhyme scheme. At one point he asked me, "What is the bone in your head called?" At first, I was puzzled, but then I chuckled and answered, "Oh, skull." This word was important because Lalo was following the traditions of his family by bringing the word *calaveras/skulls* into his story. In the original mentor text about Halloween, the word *calavera* was not used. But during the Day of the Dead, *calaveras* are important symbols, and Lalo recognized that importance and used the word to enrich a school-based story that challenged normative ideas of acceptable school holidays. Furthermore, Lalo used his cultural knowledge to capture the tone of Day of the Dead through a turn in the last stanza of his text. At the end of the mentor text, the tone of the turn was comical, which is indicative of a Halloween theme of jests and jokes. On the basis of his personal knowledge, Lalo brought a turn with a somber tone to his story:

Families come from far and near
To respect their family hear
They all bow their head
To remember on the day of the dead.

CONCLUSION

Cahnmann (2005) wrote that many studies in bilingualism focus only on the learning of the language and not the "larger systems of social inequality," and it is "less common [to] have" studies where "discourse[s] [are] examined for [their] potential for resistance rather than containment" (p. 231). At the time of teaching this class, I was an emerging Spanish speaker, and I worried about how I could assist my students in acquiring literacy in a language that I was still learning. It turns out that the same strategies that helped me with Spanish literacy also helped the students. For me and the students, the dual-language mentor text assisted us with spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and translation in Spanish. The dual-language mentor text performed as a dual-language teacher in typically monolingual classroom. The Spanish texts helped all of us resist monolingualism and the school's monolingual norms. The English portions of the books were helpful structures for students as well. The English text served as another language teacher, allowing me to spend more individual time with students. Over the remaining school year, as

a whole the class became more independent. Students wanted to design their own activities, choose their own books, work in groups or independently, decide what to write about, and publish in a variety of formats. These different options opened a space where students could connect through multiple languages to “[expand] the limits of what constitutes an acceptable response” (Medina, 2010, p. 58). As a result, “bringing the outside in” through dual-language stories, poems, speaking, and writing created a space for the students to critique marginalizing discourses. The students especially demonstrated that their multilingual repertoire was extensive and interesting; that they could master a second language while keeping the first; and that they were intelligent and creative thinkers.

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