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## **Strategies to Support Children's Reading Progress at Home: Tools for Parents of Bilingual Children**

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Strategies to Support Children's Reading Progress at Home:  
Tools for Parents of Bilingual Children

By  
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Degree of Master of Science in Education  
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## Abstract

The idea of gathering tools for parents of bilingual children to utilize at home to support their children's reading progress emerged from the combination of different factors. My placements during my studies at Bank Street College of Education provided me with the opportunity to learn reading strategies and utilize them with young children in the classroom.

As a parent of bilingual children, these strategies had been valuable in furthering my children's reading skills in both English and Spanish. While talking to other parents of bilingual children, I have learned about their frustrations of not knowing how to support their children's reading process at home. I realize that parents need support themselves so that they can develop and gather ideas on how to work with their children at home. I find that many parents do not have time to attend workshops at their children's school because their work schedule does not allow them.

The goal of this handbook is to provide parents with reading strategies they can utilize as tools when reading with their children at home. It intends to help parents utilize some of the reading strategies teachers in a dual language bilingual classrooms implement during reading instruction.

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## **I. Introduction**

Many parents worry that their children won't be able to become English proficient if they attend dual language classrooms. Parents many times decide to enroll their children in monolingual English classrooms because of the misconception that if they attend English-only instruction classrooms, they will learn English faster than those attending dual language classrooms. Although this statement could be true for some English Language Learners, experts on bilingualism affirm that "The idea that if children keep their language they will not learn English, or they will learn it wrong, is false" (Ada & Baker, 2001, p. 43). Thus, it is important to understand that speaking English is not enough for academic success. Children need to develop the language proficiency necessary to learn to read and write in English, and if they do not have a strong literacy foundation in their first language, ultimately they will fall behind.

As a student and future teacher of bilingual education, I believe that teaching children in both languages can only have a positive impact on their academic success. As a parent who is raising her children bilingually, I believe that it is important to provide children with the opportunity to experience their two cultural backgrounds to the largest extent. In order to do this, it is imperative that my children maintain their Spanish so that they can have first-hand cultural experiences when visiting Mexico. I believe culture is "a dynamic, creative, and continuous process including behaviors, values, and substance learned and shared by people that guides them in their struggle for survival and gives meaning to their lives" (Arvizu, Snyder, & Espinosa, 1980, as cited in Lessow-Hurley, 2005, p. 104). I believe that language and culture are tied to each other,

and that one cannot exist without the other. I also believe that a person's identity is influenced by the culture in which they grow.

As a recent immigrant, my language has become an integral part of my identity because it keeps me connected to my family and my culture. It is the language I use to tell my children stories of my childhood and the language I use when I want them to understand things that are important in life. It is the language in which I read to them every night, and the one I use to tell them that I love them.

Spanish is the language my children use when they ask about their Mexican family, and when they want to know when we will go back to visit. It is the language my oldest child uses to tell her younger sister a story I told her about a place or time in Mexico. It is the language my children, at six and four years of age, have become to identify with their Mexican heritage.

When my husband and I decided to have children, there was never a question about raising them bilingual. We knew we wanted our children to learn both English and Spanish because we believe that our languages are an important part of who each one of us is as individuals. We never stopped to think about how were we going to carry on the task because we saw it as an easy and natural process. I was going to speak Spanish and my husband English. We never thought we needed to review books or literature about raising bilingual children. However as time went by, my children started addressing me and answering my questions in English more often. Fortunately, by that time, I had started my studies at Bank Street and had read about the different existing methods to raising bilingual children. It was then that my husband and I re-discussed our method for raising our children bilingually and decided that there needed to be a change.

After reading the book *Guide for parents and teachers of bilingual children* (2001), by Alma Flor Ada and Colin Baker, we understood that if we wanted our children to be bilingual then we needed to have a linguistic plan. That is, have a clear plan of when and where to speak each language. According to the authors, “the home language [needed] more stimulation in order to balance against the majority language outside the home” (p 6). In addition, the authors enlist other recognized advantages of biligualism and bilingual education:

**Comunication advantages:** Bilingual people have more communication opportunities with family members in their country of origen, with more people in the community, at an international level, and at work.

**Advantages in the development of thought:** Bilingualism has a positive impact in the ability to think regarding creativity and communication sensibility.

**Academic advantages:** Bilingual people are more successfull in acquiring academic knowledge and will usually learn a third language easier (p 2).

Based on this information, we decided that if we wanted to raise our children truly bilingually, we needed a linguistic plan. We decided to speak only the minority language at home. We also decided to extend the time we spend in Mexico so that they have even more oportunitites to interact with their relatives and learn even more about the culture.

My oldest daughter started school, and since she did not get a placement in a dual language program, she spent her kindergarten year in a monolingual English school. She then started first grade in a dual language classroom, and after six months, she is advancing her reading and writing skills in both English and Spanish at grade level according to New York City standards. She is a clear example of how the reading skills

acquired in one language transfer when learning to read in a second language. Transfer is a very important concept in bilingualism. It means that concepts learned in the first language “do not have to be re-learned in the second language. The only new thing that needs to be learned is the concept’s name in the new language. Concepts do not need to be understood all over again” (Ada & Baker, 2001, p. 37).

Talking to other mothers in the playground while waiting for our children at the end of the school day, I realized that parents of bilingual children many times experience frustrations for not being able to help their children in their learning process. More specifically, they feel frustrated because their children’s reading progress is moving at a slow pace, and they do not know how to support them.

These parents’ experiences, my own process with my children, and my experiences in my supervised fieldwork placements, have made me realize that parents of bilingual children need tools they can use to support their children in advancing their reading skills. With this in mind, I decided to create a handbook for parents of bilingual children in kindergarten, in which they will find simple tools they can use to support reading development at home.

This handbook will contain:

- An overview of the different bilingual programs: English as a Second Language (ESL), transitional, and dual language programs.
- An overview of reading instruction in English and in Spanish. What should children in kindergarten learn about reading according to New York City Department of Education standards?
- Tools parents can use at home to support their children in their reading skills



- Conclusion
- Appendix

## **II. Theory behind Bilingual Programs**

Bilingual education has existed in the United States since the 19th century, when dual language instruction was offered in more than a dozen states in a variety of languages. At that time, both immigrants and Native Americans made dual language instruction available to their children. By the end of the 19th century, increasing immigration resulted in a wave of xenophobia that targeted foreign languages, and by 1923 a total of 34 of the 48 states had English-only instructional policies. In the 20th century dual language instruction was established back in response to the new immigrants, and laws for founding native language instruction were signed.

One of the well known struggles in bilingual education is *Lau v. Nichols*. In 1974, “the U.S. Supreme Court recognized the connection between native language rights and equal educational opportunity by ruling unanimously that the civil rights of students who did not understand the language of instruction were indeed being violated” (Nieto, 2005, p 12). This ruling gave bilingual education the status of “right.” Thus, our children have the right to educational instruction in their native language.

The advocates of bilingual education have many reasons to argue in favor of providing children with the opportunity to not only learn in their first language, but also to maintain their language while they acquire English. For many years now research has established a positive correlation between learning to read in Spanish and subsequent reading achievement in English (Collier & Tomas, 1995; Greene, 1998; Leasher-Madrid

& García, 1985; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). That is, when children develop strong reading skills in their first language, they will be able to transfer many of those readings skills when learning to read in English.

According to Nieto (2005), some of the secondary effects of bilingualism are “motivating students to remain in school rather than dropping out” (p 13). If a child understands what has been discussed in the classroom, then children will be able to participate and take an active role in their learning. In 2004, James Crawford concluded that “successful bilingual programs have demonstrated that students can learn through their native language while learning English *and* achieving academically” (p 13). Year after year, research on bilingualism conclude that there is a positive correlation between learning in a native language and academic achievement in a second language.

Parents should have this information available to them when trying to decide the program their children will be attending. Schools are obligated to provide parents with this information. New York City public schools usually offer one, or two of the following programs: English as a Second Language (ESL), transitional, and/or dual language programs. These will be briefly discussed in the following section.

### III. Program Design

The most common bilingual programs are English as a Second Language (ESL), transitional, and dual language programs.

#### ➤ English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs:

The goal of ESL is that students acquire English in three years. Academic instruction is in English, but teachers implement teaching strategies of English as a Second Language. Maintenance of the first language is not a concern in this program. The primary goal is for students to learn English.

#### ➤ Transitional Bilingual Programs:

Students receive academic instruction in both languages. Academic instruction is provided in the first language 60% of the time and 40% in English. The instruction in English increases to 100%. The goal is monolingualism or the loss of the first language.

#### ➤ Dual Language Bilingual Programs:

These programs have 50% English dominant students and 50% of students dominant

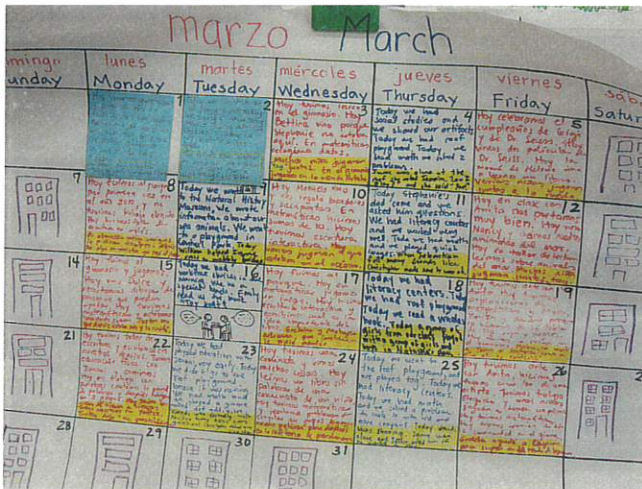
in another language. Academic instruction is provided in English 50% of the time and in the other language the other 50%. The focus is clear because the emphasis is in developing both language as well as supporting students' cultures.



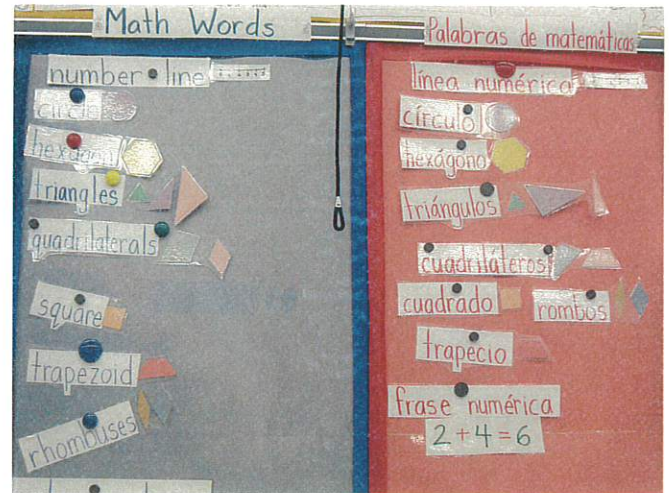
My previous supervised fieldwork placement was a dual language school which implements the 50-50 model. Languages alternate using English one day followed by



spanish the next day. The entire school uses color codes, blue for English and red for Spanish. All the visual aids and teacher created charts are written in the color corresponding to the language of instruction for the day.



Notice the pattern of red and blue revealing the language of instruction for each day.



This math bulletin illustrates visual materials in both languages available to students in the classroom

In the classroom there are two libraries, one in English and one in Spanish and all books are separated according to reading levels. Students have access to the libraries and can choose and pick books to read based on their reading levels. However libraries are covered in order to maintain the language of the day.



English language library is covered in order to maintain consistency with the language of instruction of the day.



Part of the Spanish library. Notice the red baskets

In this particular school, the strategies of color-coding, alternating days of language instruction, and highlighting materials in the language of instruction are implemented in order to emphasize the maintenance and development of the two languages.

The following section contains a description of the ways in which reading instruction is approached in this dual language classroom, in order to meet New York City standards for kindergarten.

#### **IV. Reading Instruction in a Kindergarten Dual Language Classroom**

One of the advantages for Spanish-speaking children is that there are similar reading instructional methods for English and Spanish. These similarities exist because both languages are very similar. Thus, children who have strong reading skills in Spanish will easily transfer those skills when learning to read in English.

Some of the similarities between English and Spanish are the following: Both languages are alphabetic; reading and writing have the same directionality, from left to right and top to bottom. There is a percentage of cognates, or “words with similar appearance, sound, and meaning, between the two languages” (Colorin Colorado, 2007). Most of the time, with exception of some rules, “sentences in both languages have the same basic structures” (Colorin Colorado, 2007).

Some of the differences between English and Spanish are that Spanish has one to one sound to letter correspondence, vowels in English have more than one sound. There are only five vowels in Spanish and “more than 14 in English” (Colorin Colorado, 2007).



In English, consonants and their sounds are taught before vowels; in Spanish vowels and their sounds are taught before consonants

Reading instruction in this kindergarten dual language classroom is taught based on what kindergarten students are required to know, according to New York City learning standards. Children in kindergarten should learn, develop, and master the following reading skills:

- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness
- Print Awareness
- Alphabet Recognition and Phonics
- Fluency
- Background Knowledge and Vocabulary Development
- Comprehension Strategies
- Motivation to read

(The University of the State of New York, 2005, p. 14-15)

The above information can seem overwhelming. However, parents of bilingual children should keep in mind that in dual language classrooms, students learn in both



Typical schedule for the day

languages in a continuum. That means that although the language of instruction is alternating, there is continuity in their learning process. What is done on Spanish day is reviewed the following day in English. These reviews are done in a variety of ways from revision of vocabulary to conversations about the topics the class discussed the previous day. Furthermore, the homework given to the students is based on the work done in the classroom on that day and in the language of instruction for that day.

Reviewing homework with their children, will provide parents with valuable information not only about what their children are learning at school, but also about the areas where their children need support. In the following section parents will find a series of suggested activities they can use at home in order to assist their children in their reading progress. The aim of the activities is to reinforce reading strategies that children need to acquire in order to be able to read, and or advance their reading skills. One way in which parents can support their children's reading progress is by reading to them. By reading to their children, parents will be modeling and reinforcing reading strategies their children are learning in their classroom.

## **V. Tools**

The previous section introduced parents of young children in dual language programs to the reading goals for kindergarten students. In this section, parents will find information about the activities implemented in order to meet those goals. Parents will also find suggested activities to utilize as tools, to practice reading strategies with their children in order to help them advance their reading skills. All these resources were created by the classroom teachers with whom I worked with during my supervised fieldwork placements.

One way to help children develop phonological and phonemic awareness, print awareness, alphabet recognition, and phonics, is by having a word wall. Classrooms have two word walls next to each other, containing the specifics of each language. Every day the class reviews, and adds words, to the word wall corresponding to the language of instruction.



The review is done by chanting the words and or letters in the word wall. A student in the classroom has the job of pointing to each word, and the class as a whole says the word aloud. This activity allows children to practice the

sounds in spoken language. Furthermore, chanting the words, allows children to distinguish the individual sounds that form a word, which is known as phonemic awareness.

In a dual language classroom there should be separate word walls for each



language and each word wall should reflect the specifics of each language. For example, Escamilla (1999) states that word walls in bilingual classrooms should integrate frequently used words, illustrate initial consonant sounds, articles, model upper and

lower-case letters, provide examples of words for consonants and vowels, and examples of high-utility words that are frequently misspelled. Word walls should also demonstrate



how to join syllables to make words, include sight words, as well as have examples of words with accents marks. Students also utilize the word wall as a resource for writing.

Whenever they do not know how to



write a word, the teacher asks them to identify the first sound of the word, and then directs the child to the word wall to look for the word. Often the teacher assists the child by identifying the sounds in the word he is looking for, and then the child looks for the word in the wall.

One way in which parents can help their children learn their sight words<sup>1</sup> is reviewing the list with them just as the teacher reviews the word wall in class. Students take home a list of sight words for each language so that they can read them and eventually recognize them within a sentence or paragraph. Similarly to what the teacher does in the classroom, parents can chant together with their child the list of sight words in Spanish while pointing at each word.

In the classroom there is daily read alouds, as well as shared reading and guided reading. All these different methods of teaching reading are also called universal approaches of balanced literacy. Balanced literacy according to Escamilla (1999) “involves a program that combines phonological awareness skills and decoding with language- and literature-rich activities” (p 4). During read alouds, the teacher models for the students one-to-one



Shared reading

correspondence between spoken and written words. They also model the strategies of looking at the pictures in order to understand meaning, as well as proper intonation. All these strategies are also modeled during shared and guided

<sup>1</sup> See appendix I

readings. During shared reading teachers use books with predictable patterns in the text. After reading a couple of pages, children are encouraged to finish a sentence in each page. During guided reading, the teacher models reading strategies for the children while reading the book, and then the children take their turn to read the same book.

When reading to their children at home, parents can ask their children to point at the sight words he or she recognizes in the text. While reading, parents can also point to each word as they read in order to reinforce one-to-one correspondence between spoken and written words, just as the teacher does in shared and guided reading in the classroom. Moreover, pointing to the text while reading also provides children with print awareness, because it helps the child distinguish between words and letters, as well as reading directionality from left to right and top to bottom. Pointing to the words in the text also helps children distinguish between print and pictures.

In order to address comprehension and fluency skills established by the standards, the teacher integrates other elements of balanced literacy. Although the activities to address standards enlister below can seem repetitive, it is important to remember that they address the development of more than one skill, just as the development of skills overlap.

- Alphabet recognition and phonics. The letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds are introduced and practiced daily in different ways. Some times they say the alphabet in a chant, and other times they sing it. Students say the letter and the corresponding sound. As a way to help students remember the letters, they have learned its corresponding sign in sign language. Every time the class reviews the alphabet they verbalize the name of the letter, the sound, and produce the corresponding sign.

- Phonological awareness and decoding skills. The teacher implements activities rich in language and literature. Some of those activities include rhyming games, read alouds of rhymes, singing rhymes, and writing own rhymes. Syllable clapping games and grouping objects according to initial or final sounds are also part of the activities implemented in the classroom. All these activities enhance children's listening skills or phonological awareness, which children need in order to be able to integrate knowledge and understandings.
- Print awareness and comprehension strategies. Read alouds are medium to teach these skills and develop understanding. Every time the teacher introduces a book, she points at the text, which in turn helps students understand the directionability of reading, that is left to right and top to bottom. The class also talks about the book and the issues presented in the book. In order to start, the teacher asks: What is the story about? Children share their ideas or comments. Another question the teachers asks is: What part of the story did you like the most? Children also volunteer their answers, which many of them connect to personal experiences. This connection is the result of the children's ability to put sounds, words and sentences together in order to build an understanding of the story the teacher reads.

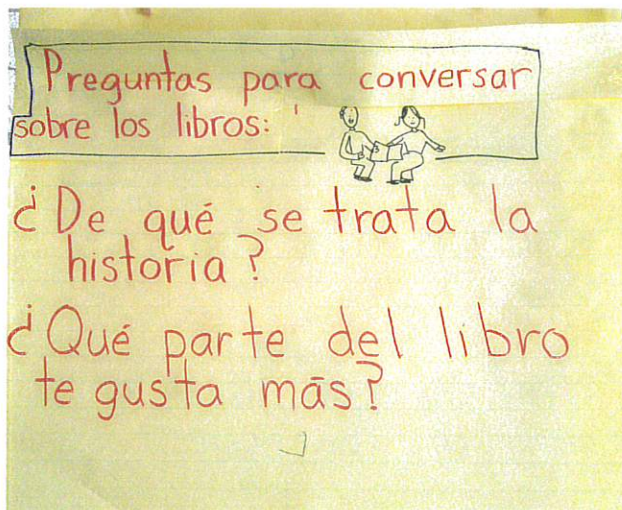
During transitions from one activity to the next, sometimes the teachers play a CD with rhymes. Furthermore, most days during transition time to lunch, the teacher plays the guitar and sings different songs, including rhymes. On Fridays, the teacher plays the guitar and the class sings during the meeting at the end of the day. Syllable clapping games are usually played at the rug, where the teacher can see students and students can

see the teacher. The grouping games are usually implemented during writing workshop, where children write the name of the objects they grouped together.

In order to support alphabet recognition and phonics, parents can sing the alphabet song with their children in Spanish. They can practice the sound of each letter in the alphabet as well.

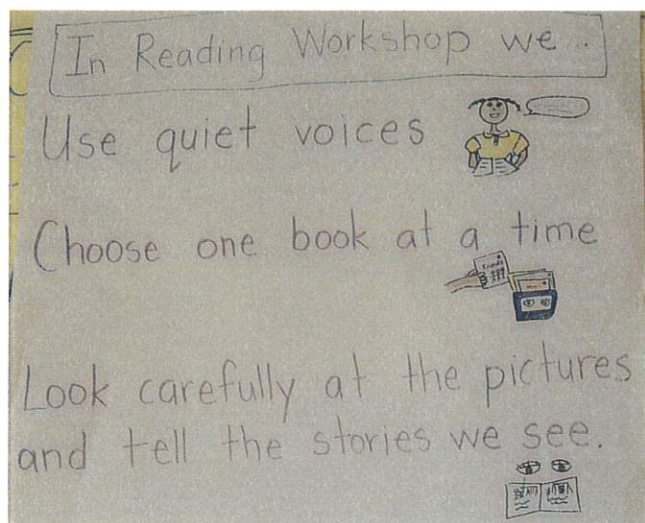
In order to support phonological skills development, parents can teach their children rhymes or practice with them the ones children learn in the classroom. This will help strenght their phonological awareness skills as they recognize that in rhymes the ending sounds of the rhyming words are the same. Remember that reinforcing these skills in Spanish is important because strong foundation in the first language has a positive impact when learning a second language as those skills transfer.

In order to reinforce comprehension skills, after reading to their children, parents can ask them questions about it. Ask the same questions the teacher uses in the classroom, or others such as: "Did you like it? Why? After children answer these questions, parents can share with their children their impressions about the book. By sharing their impressions, parents can model for thr children how to talk about the book and the parts they like or did not like.



Parents can also encourage their children to change the end of the story and even asked them *What would you have done?* Children are familiar with these questions because they use them in the classroom.

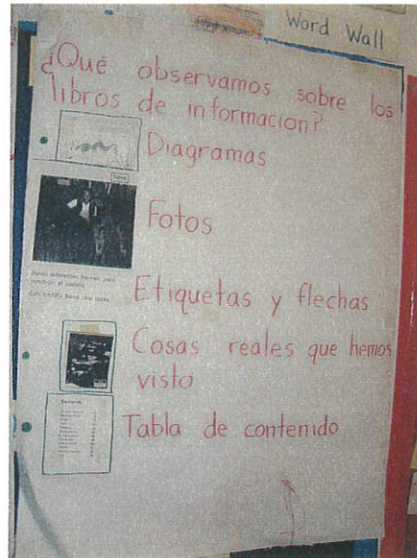
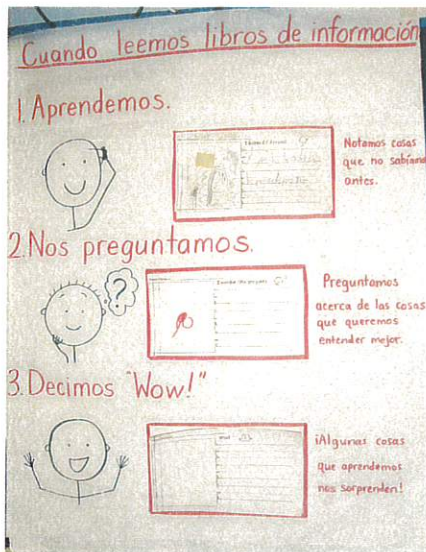
In the classroom, children have visual aids that remind them of the steps to follow during reading workshop.



Parents can use some of these steps when reading to their children, such as choosing or looking at one book at a time, and looking carefully at the pictures to understand the story. Based on their reading level, children usually take a bag with books for

them to read at home. Some of those books are informational books or non-fiction books. Since informational books provide the reader with facts, parents can use the three steps in the pictures below to model for their children how to use informational books.

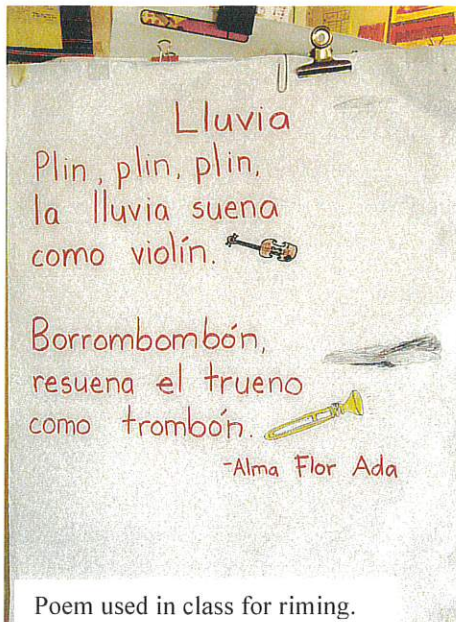




By nature, children copy what parents do. We as parents should take advantage of those moments and help our children realize the unlimited learning opportunities that books can provide them. If children see their parents interested in the book they will also become interested. In order to model learning, the parent can open the book and comment on something he or she did not know and just learned from the book. The next step is verbalize a question about the new learned fact, and finally comment with excitement about the learned information.

One way in which I have helped my children discover the unlimited learning possibilities in books, is by talking during dinner about something I learned from reading. When my children started bringing informational books home, we talked about it during dinner time because that is the meal we all have together as a family. During this time we all share things we did during the day, we listen to each other and comment about things we did or happen to us. I found this to be an exelent opportunity to talk about the new learned information because we all learn different things as a family, but also because the discussion helps them understand..

There are other ways in which parents can help their children advance their reading skills. Some of those activities are storytelling, poems, singing, words and



naming games. Parents can also encourage their children to write holiday and birthday cards to their relatives. All these activities will provide children with vocabulary and elements of narrative such as beginning, middle and end. At the same time they will be also modeling for their children storytelling, which is a necessary skill in school because children need to know

how to use verbal language to communicate their ideas to others.

As a parent of bilingual children I have also learned to utilize childhood poems, rhymes and chanting games as a resource to help my children not only to learn about my childhood, but also to reinforce their listening skills, and other phonological awareness skills in Spanish.

Reading to my children in Spanish is a part of our home schedule that cannot be negotiated or compromised. It does not matter how tired I am, my children would never allow me to send them to bed without reading first. They love to listen to the stories and the different voices, intonations and noises I make while reading depending on the characters. I have found that these 'animation' elements make the stories even more appealing to children. Furthermore, it is their love for reading what have drive them to write their own stories, in which they mix and match stories I have read to them and their characters.

Reading to children, along with all the other activities mentioned above can serve as the bridge to connect the two worlds in which children learn. This connection is indeed extremely important because if successful, students will be able to generalize this connection to all the other academic subjects. In turn, students will be able to relate what they learn and apply their knowledge into their daily life.



## **VI. Conclusions**

Parents who want to raise their children bilingually do not always have the support necessary to help their children succeed academically. Many parents understand that reading and writing skills are necessary in order to achieve academic success. However, they lack ideas or tools to assist their children advance their reading skills specially when it comes to bilingual children. More than ever, results of research studies on bilingualism confirm the positive correlation between strong reading skills in Spanish and subsequent reading achievement in English (Collier & Tomas, 1995; Greene, 1998; Leasher-Madrid & García, 1985; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Parents of bilingual children should know that by supporting their children's reading skills in their native language, they are helping them to develop reading strategies, which their children will transfer or use when learning to read in English.

As a parent who is raising bilingual children, I believe that it is important to help them realize that reading and writing in both languages will provide them with a broad, more flexible cultural vision of the world, as well as more profesional opportunitites in the future. I am happy to say that I have provided my children with the opportunity to discover the joy that reading and writing in both their languages can bring them. By reading to my children every night in both English and Spanish, I have helped them develop love for reading. They have come to love writing as well as listening to stories and write their own stories.

It is my hope that the ideas provided in this paper will help other parents feel the pleasure of helping their children advance their reading skills, but most importantly, to

discover the joy of reading and writing. I believe that once children discover the joy and the unlimited possibilities that reading brings them, they will never stop reading.

## VII. Appendix

- List of sight words in Spanish
- List of sight words in English

## List of sight words in Spanish

es	los
una	a
o	está
le	Yo
gusta	él
y	Mio
mira	en
me	veo
la	es
mío	soy
lo	no
si	ves
las	una
se	mamá
papá	hace
son	de
niño	niña
ya	que
tu	tengo
donde	aquí
pero	hijo
hija	

*Kindergarten High Frequency Word List*

a	after	all	an	and	are
as	ask	at	be	big	but
by	can	come	did	do	does
five	for	four	from	get	had
has	have	he	here	him	his
I	if	in	is	it	just
like	little	look	make	me	my
no	not	of	on	one	out
pretty	say	says	said	see	she
so	some	that	the	them	then
there	they	this	three	to	too
two	under	up	walk	was	we
what	when	where	who	will	yes
yours	you				

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