MAKING MEANING THROUGH TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE LITERACY CLASSROOM

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Students who speak languages other than English are the fastest growing population in schools today (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2010). The term emergent bilingual highlights the unique strengths that these students possess: Along with simultaneously acquiring English and making sense of content material, emergent bilinguals also continue to develop their heritage languages in their homes and communities. Cummins (2005) has argued that leveraging these students’ bilingualism can promote their academic, cognitive, and social achievement. Rather than limiting emergent bilinguals to the use of a single language when making meaning in the classroom, translanguaging pedagogies encourage students to draw from all of their linguistic resources (García & Kleifgen, 2010). In this Teaching Tip, we share three examples of pedagogies that productively engage students’ heritage languages in the literacy classroom. Each activity that we share not only leverages students’ heritage languages for academic achievement in English but also strives to promote students’ emerging bilingualism.

Translanguaging is based on the idea that emergent bilinguals regularly and naturally use all of their languages to make meaning in the world (García & Kleifgen, 2010). These languages are part of one linguistic system that an individual strategically accesses depending on the context. In the literacy classroom, pedagogies that welcome the use of translanguaging can help emergent bilinguals in a variety of ways, such as facilitating access to background knowledge (Sayer, 2013); assisting with the acquisition of new vocabulary (Cunningham & Graham, 2000); strengthening understandings about features of language, or metalinguistic...

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awareness (Jiménez et al., 2015); and promoting the use of effective reading strategies like summarizing and clarifying concepts in texts (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2008). Beyond these academic benefits, welcoming translanguaging into the classroom can build important home-school connections (Miller & Rowe, 2014) and create more inclusive classroom environments (Souto-Manning & Felderman, 2013), especially for students in the early stages of developing their English proficiency. Canagarajah (2013) echoes this sentiment, arguing that incorporating translanguaging in instruction offers possibilities not only for promoting academic achievement but also for developing students’ proficiencies as strategic users of language.

Despite these benefits, implementing translanguaging pedagogies can be a daunting task, especially when the teacher does not speak students’ heritage languages and students speak many different heritage languages in the classroom (Pacheco, David, & Jiménez, 2015). Over the last four years, we have worked closely with elementary school teachers in classrooms with students born in Egypt, Mexico, Bhutan, Somalia, and Uzbekistan, to name just a few. Though the majority of these teachers do not speak students’ heritage languages, we observed them incorporating students’ languages in their literacy instruction in productive and innovative ways. In the following sections, we share snapshots of three different translanguaging pedagogies from their instruction.

**Text Features and Heritage Language Newspapers**

Ms. Gardner teaches third grade and is working with students to use text features to help make sense of informational texts (Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, & Wilson, 2011). She knows that attending to the title or picture that accompanies a passage, for example, will help add important contextual information that could tap into students’ background knowledge or encourage predictions. She begins her lesson by passing out a bag with sticky notes to pairs of students. The words **title**, **author**, **caption**, **picture**, **map**, and **chart** are written on the notes. She explains to students that they are going to identify these text features in writing that they might see outside of school. She then passes out newspapers written in Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and English, which she collected over the weekend at World Food Market. Some students have newspapers written in languages that they speak; others do not. They work in pairs and soon identify the location of the title, written in bold, above a picture, and then a caption written beneath a photo. They argue about where to find the name of the author of an article written in Arabic, and they hypothesize about the meaning of the numbers below a weather map in the Chinese newspaper. Ms. Gardner then holds a Spanish-language newspaper in front of the class and asks her students to predict, through looking at an accompanying picture, what an article might be about. She then asks a Spanish-speaking student to read the title of the article to see if that prediction could be true.

Jiménez, Smith, and Teague (2009) call this type of lesson a **community literacies activity**, as it bridges the textual world of students’ lives outside of school with an in-school literacy activity. This newspaper activity, along with other activities that encourage students to analyze advertisements, photographs, flyers, and other community texts, can be used with students in middle school as well. In this 20-minute lesson, Ms. Gardner helped students develop important understandings about text features. She helped them identify similarities in features across texts, such as the use of bold or italicized script in titles, and helped them identify the functions of these features in different texts. Most importantly, Ms. Gardner used students’ heritage languages to build conceptual understandings about the overall purpose of text features. Even when a student might not speak Spanish, for example, a picture or chart holds useful and important information that helps with comprehension. Princess, an Uzbek speaker, reflected this when she compared newspapers written in Chinese and Spanish and exclaimed, “They all have headings!” Ms. Gardner then continued this lesson by reading an English-language article about hurricanes with the assistance of text features.

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**Summarizing and Bilingual Book Reports**

Nearly all of the emergent bilingual students in Ms. Little’s second-grade classroom speak Spanish as a heritage language; their school is located in a neighborhood with many families from Mexico and Central America. In small-group guided reading instruction, Ms. Little is working with two students who recently moved to the U.S. and two emergent bilinguals that have attended school in the U.S. since preschool. She is helping students strengthen their abilities to summarize English texts as a means to develop and demonstrate their reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2008).

Ms. Little explains to the students that they will get to make book reports in Spanish of the English text *Just a Seed*. She tells them that she will then use these book reports to help other students understand the story if they don’t speak English. After students individually whisper-read the text, Ms. Little divides them into pairs with different levels of Spanish and English proficiency. First, she asks the pairs to discuss in English or in Spanish what happens to the seed over the course of the story. She asks them to describe what each character did with the seed on each page. Lastly, she gives each pair a T-chart and asks them to write what the four characters—the girl, the artist, the boy, and the mother—did with the seed in the story. On the left side of the chart, students write these events in Spanish, and on the right, in English. When they finish their time in guided reading, they use the T-charts to write a summary in English and in Spanish during the writing portion of their center time.

In Figure 1, we share two pages from these book reports that include text and images. Christopher and Alan both summarized the story differently when writing in Spanish. Ms. Little could then use this opportunity to have students compare their book reports and discuss which student-authored text best summarizes the story.

Students at the earliest stages of developing their English proficiency may face challenges in expressing content understandings in English (Barrera, Valdés, & Cardenas, 1986). Encouraging students to speak and write in their heritage languages can give them opportunities to clarify misconceptions in texts, tap into their background knowledge, and demonstrate their understandings. In this guided reading activity, students used Spanish and English to first talk about meanings in an English text, then identify important aspects of this text, and lastly summarize this text in writing for an authentic audience (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Even when students do not know how to write in their heritage language, they can write the sounds they hear in their heritage language into English script, thus developing their understandings of letter and sound correspondence. Teachers can also direct students to attend to cognates in the text, such as *flower*/*flor* and *artist/artista*, an important strategy for bilingual readers (Jiménez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996). Teachers can also pair students with different language proficiencies, as Ms. Little did. Students can learn from each other’s expertise, with the more proficient Spanish-speaking student acting as an expert and leading the writing in Spanish and the more proficient English-speaking student acting as an expert and leading the writing in English (Martin-Beltrán, 2010).

**Translating and Home Photos**

Ms. Camden’s preschool classroom is composed entirely of emergent bilinguals who speak several languages, including Spanish, Nepali, Arabic, Karen, and Bahadini, a Kurdish language. Ms. Camden’s class participated in a research project on composing dual-language e-books on iPads. Three apps—Drawing Pad, Book Creator, and iBooks—were
used in e-book composing activities. Using Drawing Pad, children had opportunities to draw and write with their fingers or a stylus using an array of digital tools, including digital markers, pencils, chalk, and paintbrushes. With Book Creator, children created multi-page e-books using digital photos or drawings, voice recordings made with the app’s sound recording feature, and text created freehand or with the app’s digital keyboard. An important feature of Book Creator was the possibility of placing multiple sound recordings, often in the child’s heritage language and in English, on each page. When complete, e-books were saved to the iBooks library, where children could read and listen to their own books and peers’ books.

During center time, 4-year-old children worked one-on-one and in small groups with researchers and teachers to compose e-books in 15- to 30-minute sessions. As a way to learn about children’s lives and languages outside of school, we sent home kid-friendly digital cameras with children and included instructions to take photos of their homes and communities. When children returned the cameras, we uploaded their photos to the iPad, and children used their home photos in their e-books. During home photo sessions, children and teachers engaged in extended conversations about the people and places featured in the photos. Children used their heritage languages and English to describe their relationships, their toys, their pets, and their favorite foods. The photos made visible aspects of children’s multilingual and multicultural lives outside of school, providing an entry point for children’s cultural practices and heritage languages to become part of their literacy learning in school. Sometimes, children spontaneously described their home photos using their heritage languages, and we invited children to label photo features in two languages, which led to two-way language learning. For example, Reena, a Nepali-English emergent bilingual, taught us the Nepali labels for dress, water, and baby, and Reena learned the English words pillow and dishes. While looking at a photo of Reena’s family, Mary (second author) and Reena had the following conversation.

Mary  Do you know the word for baby in Nepali?
Reena  Naani.
Mary  Naani? Okay, I got to write these down.

Not only did Mary prompt Reena to share her heritage language, she also marked Reena’s language as important for literacy learning in the classroom by recording the words that Reena shared. Reena encoded the bilingual labels in her home photo e-book, using Book Creator’s sound recording feature (see Figure 2). The photos were visual anchors that became common ground for speakers of different languages and opened up opportunities for translanguaging.

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In these home photo conversations and composing sessions, children actively engaged in using language connected to their everyday lives, enacting the conditions that support language learning (Cambourne, 1995). Furthermore, children used all their linguistic resources to describe their photos and were not limited to only their English knowledge. We routinely asked children how to say words in their heritage languages, and they practiced strategically alternating between their two languages on demand. When children translated their messages, they developed metalinguistic awareness of how language works and how to manipulate their language use for specific purposes. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, children learned that their heritage languages and lives outside of school had a visible and valued place in Ms. Camden’s multilingual classroom.

Conclusion

Reyes (2012) argues that leveraging all of students’ linguistic resources supports their classroom achievement. She adds, however, that educators must take an active stance in welcoming and developing all of a student’s linguistic resources if that student is to continue strengthening his or her bilingualism over time. These three examples show ways in which educators can actively work toward this 21st-century goal (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The examples also show the rich possibilities that translanguaging pedagogies hold for teachers to learn about their students. When a teacher asks his students to teach him how to write a word in Arabic, for example, that teacher might learn something about his students’ linguistic proficiencies and something about the differences between Arabic and English script. When a teacher asks her student to tell her the name of her tía or about a trip to a new restaurant, that teacher might learn about her student’s experiences outside of school that can be meaningfully integrated into the classroom curriculum. We believe that translanguaging pedagogies hold tremendous potential for creating classrooms rich with language, culture, and multiple perspectives that encourage both student and teacher learning.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the students and teachers who participated in this research.

REFERENCES


