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In English You Read with a Stopwatch: A Journey towards Biliteracy in Two Older Adopted Salvadoran Children

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Abstract

This longitudinal case study provides an in-depth exploration of the journey toward bilingualism and biliteracy of two older adopted Salvadoran siblings in U.S. schools. Data sources include observations in the home and school, interviews, written artifacts, field notes, and various reading test scores. Analysis suggests that literacy instruction in English tended to focus more on phonics and fluency than comprehension and vocabulary, and it assumed a level of oral proficiency in English that neither of the children had. Spanish literacy instruction was aimed toward children of Mexican origin that was neither culturally relevant nor geared toward their specific language needs. The authors recommend that educators recognize the importance of linguistic and cultural differences when working with both first and second language literacy.

*Mom: Braydon, ven a leer conmigo en inglés. Quiero escucharte.
(Braydon, come read with me in English. I want to listen to you.)*

*Braydon: Okay, mamá, pero ¿dónde está el reloj? (Okay, mom, but where
is the watch?)*

Mom: ¿Cómo qué el reloj? (What do you mean about a watch?)

*Braydon: En inglés, tienes que tener el reloj para contar cuántas palabras
lees en unos minutos. En español, nomás lees, pero en inglés, hay que
tener un reloj especial. (In English you have to have a watch to count how
many words you can read in some minutes. In Spanish, you just read, but
in English, you have to have a special watch.)*

The above vignette documents a conversation between a mother and her newly adopted 9-year-old Salvadoran son. Braydon had been in the U.S. for five months and in a U.S. second grade classroom for approximately two months when this conversation took place. His entrance into the U.S. school setting marked his first foray into formal education in two languages. As evidenced by the vignette, Braydon quickly developed a sense of what constituted biliteracy in his new school setting.

Introduction

There is increasing concern in the educational community regarding educational practices with respect to children who are learning English as a second language. According to U.S. Census estimates (2008a), nearly 11 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 speak a language other than English at home. Spanish is spoken in the homes of nearly 8 million of these children, and 27% of this population is estimated to speak English “less than very well” (U.S. Census, 2008b). Yet, there is a shortage of English-as-a second-language (ESL) and bilingual teachers (USDOE, 2003-2004), a shortage of appropriate assessment instruments for English language learners (ELLs) (Grant and Wong, 2004), and a lack of preparation among reading educators with regard to second language acquisition (Drucker, 2004). It is not surprising that an estimated 30-40% of ELLs when assessed in reading at the end of elementary school do not score within an acceptable range (Grant and Wong, 2004). Despite the insistence that instructional practices be more research-based, there are relatively few studies on the development of literacy in ELL students (August & Shanahan, 2006; Garcia, 2003; Garcia and Beltran, 2003).

Because the majority of ELLs are Spanish-speakers (Helman, 2004), research on the literacy practices and development of these students is vital. Previous studies have shown that when these children are first exposed to English instruction upon entrance to school, they seem to rely on both languages in the process of becoming literate (Edelsky, 1986; Reyes & Azuara, 2008). That is, initially they engage their linguistic competence or internal grammar in Spanish as they acquire their emerging notions about written language. When raised in the U.S., these emerging notions may involve some awareness of reading and writing in Spanish, developed from interactions with adults or peers, but often include an awareness of written English, developed through exposure to environmental print and media. Yet it is not uncommon for U.S. schools to have recent arrivals who lack any exposure to English and have little cultural knowledge about the U.S. More research is needed on the cultural nuances of biliteracy in children, implying a need to analyze beyond a snapshot of literacy in one language at one moment in time to a broader lens encompassing how biliteracy develops over time. Moreover, it is important to take into account the interactive nature of cultural factors and literacy acquisition in any given social setting.

With this premise in mind, the purpose of this study is to document and describe this process of becoming biliterate in two older adopted children from the time of their entrance into U.S. schools. A longitudinal case study approach is used to provide an in-depth exploration of their process towards bilingualism and biliteracy with the intent to identify school practices and social factors that enable or hinder the process.

Theoretical Framework

A sociocognitive stance frames this study, defining reading and writing as cognitive processes shaped by the social context in which they occur and develop. Since literacy practices are formed through social interaction, they are highly related to the child’s cultural milieu. Literacy is seen as a way of thinking and reasoning, involving both the oral and written modes of

language (Langer, 1987). The function and purpose of reading and writing within a community determine how these practices develop. Reading and writing are conceptualized as occurring within, and being molded by, particular cultural practices, similar to the notion of *situated literacies* (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič (2000).

In terms of reading, the principal goal within this framework is the text world the reader creates while reading (Langer, 1986). The final text world is defined by what the reader interprets within these written symbols, largely based upon the interaction of the reader's background knowledge and the text content. Written symbols are artifacts of the culture of the writer, so that learning to interpret these symbols in a sense implies the intersection of one's own cultural understandings with the cultural content within the text. This notion is particularly relevant for bilingual children, since what they bring to the text often differs dramatically from what the author intended to convey.

With respect to the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, schema theory (Anderson, 1994) and the interactive approach (Yopp & Singer, 1994) bring to bear an added element of interest for bilingual children. In this view, during reading or writing, individuals create the text's meaning based upon graphophonemic information and their own phonological and orthographic awareness, as well as their understanding of vocabulary and their developing schema about the content or topic. Language competencies and metalinguistic awareness related to text structure, syntax and pragmatics all come into play (Vellutino, 2003). In a cognitive sense, reading and writing then involve a complex interaction among the child's cognitive strategy repertoire, language competencies, prior knowledge and metalinguistic awareness.

Within a sociocognitive stance, researchers have also pointed out that this interaction between a given individual and a text occurs in a particular situation determined both by the activity in which that individual is engaged and the surrounding sociocultural milieu (Snow & Sweet, 2003). The purpose of reading and writing affects this process, as do a child's literacy experiences both at school and at home (Snow & Sweet, 2003).

The nature of literacy, then, is multifaceted for every student, but becomes more complex for children who first enter school speaking a language other than the dominant language. Since language competencies are intertwined with literacy (Vellutino, 2003), a discussion of literacy development in these students should not be disassociated from factors related to their bilingualism nor from their cultural understandings with respect to written language.

Research Methodology

This study reports the initial findings of an on-going longitudinal descriptive case study (Merriam, 1998) utilizing ethnographic methods focusing on the biliteracy development of two adopted Salvadoran children. One of the researchers is the parent of the children. In this capacity as parent, she had significant opportunities to observe and interact with the children in the home, school and community settings. Research on one's own children is not unusual (Adler & Adler, 1996; Kabuto, 2008). Parent-researchers have contributed to the fields of literacy and multiliteracy development in children (Martens, 1996; Kabuto, 2005; Schwarzer, 2001). As Kabuto (2008) stated, "Parent-research provided new ways of investigating a domain that was

highly private and complex, in which social and cultural relationships related to language were entangled with family members and practices inside and outside of the home” (p. 182).

The following research question guided the study: What factors and practices in the schooling and social environments contributed to and/or hindered the biliteracy development of the children? Data sources included observations in the home and school environment, interviews of the children, written artifacts produced by the children in English and Spanish, report cards, field notes, anecdotal records from parent-teacher conferences, and pre- and post scores from the Tejas Lee and the Jerry Johns’ Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) in Spanish and in English. Data was analyzed thematically (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Triangulation was assured through multiple data sources and extended time in the field. While data collection is still on-going, the results discussed here pertain to the first year of schooling in the U.S.

Participants

Josefina and Braydon are siblings who were adopted from El Salvador at ages 8 and 9 respectively. A Mexican-American woman, bilingual in Spanish and English, adopted them. Both children had been in a Catholic orphanage for over four years and had attended the orphanage school from pre-K to 1st in the case of Josefina and 2nd grade in Braydon’s case. The school day was four hours long, including snacks and recess. Class sizes were large and few materials were available. Over half of the grading categories on their report cards dealt with civic or moral behavior and hygiene. After school, boys received vocational training such as ceramics and carpentry. Girls were trained to become domestic servants.

According to orphanage documents, both children scored within the normal range on tests of intelligence. Braydon had acquired an understanding of the alphabetic principle in Spanish and was beginning to read. He claimed that Sor Amanda, a nun, taught him to read, not his teacher. Based upon a review of their school notebooks, literacy tasks consisted primarily of copying. Josefina demonstrated avoidance behavior of books and reading. Tearfully, Josefina stated that she did not know her letters, and that made the teacher angry. The first time their adoptive mother read them a story, they did not seem to understand the purpose of this activity. During her visits to the orphanage and school, their mother saw no children’s storybooks. There was little evidence of environmental print.

Braydon is a very outgoing and assertive child who quickly started using English. He often pretended that he knew how to do things and that he understood what was going on. For example, when asked by a child in the neighborhood in English if he knew how to play chess, Braydon said “sure,” even though he had never played chess before and did not understand the question. Josefina is shy and soft-spoken. Her vocabulary development in Spanish was behind that of her brother. For example, while Braydon understood the terms *sábanas* (sheets) and *tenedor* (fork), standard words in Salvadoran Spanish, Josefina did not. We assume because of her shyness, she had less opportunity to develop her oral language skills than her brother. She says little in any language to new people. Consequently, people tend not to engage her in conversation. In contrast to her brother, she immediately looked to her mother for translation when anyone said something in English.

Setting

Home environment. Upon arrival to the U.S., Braydon and Josefina settled into a bilingual community on the U.S. – Mexico border. Mexican and Mexican American cultural elements dominate, and code-switching between English and Spanish is the norm. Braydon quickly made friends with two neighborhood children who were bilingual. Josefina interacted with these same children, although on a more limited basis. The children began learning English with the help of their new friends who frequently code-switched during play. Braydon first began reading in English as he learned to play video games with the help of his neighborhood friends. Initially, his mother set his game console to provide written instructions in Spanish. However, his friends were unfamiliar with the Spanish terms such as *pantalla* (screen) because they only knew technological terms in English. Braydon asked his mother to change the language setting to English. Thus, he quickly developed an understanding of technology and gaming using written and oral language in English. He recognized any commands related to technology such as, “play movie” or “click here.” In that first summer, Braydon and Josefina attended a reading clinic and an athletic camp at the local university. Everyone in those settings was bilingual.

Their mother continued to use Spanish with them at home, although they also heard her speak English on the phone and with her friends. They watched television and movies occasionally in English; however, the children preferred viewing in Spanish. Braydon read animal books or Star Wars books in Spanish. Their mother read to them from the many bilingual storybooks in the home. On occasion, they requested she read in English although the story was generally interrupted by their giggles and attempts to imitate the sounds. “Whachoomachoocha” is a close approximation of the children’s efforts to produce English.

School environment. Their mother engineered their transfer to a dual language campus from the neighborhood school that had a transitional bilingual education program, because she knew of the positive outcomes of dual language programs (Perez, 2004; Thomas and Collier, 1998). Their mother was committed to bilingualism and biliteracy and understood that quality native language instruction facilitates the development of English literacy skills (Hakuta, 1986; Ramirez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1998). Her goal for their first year of schooling in the U.S. was simply that they adapt to this setting. She decided to have them repeat first and second grade because Braydon would have had to enter third grade in which a high-stakes test is given, and Josefina was still a non-reader. It became evident early on that while the school was officially designated as a dual language campus, the true emphasis was on academic achievement in English rather than full bilingualism and biliteracy.

Before the children even entered school, the mother began addressing any possible concern about the children’s oral language proficiency. Both children were tested to assess their proficiency in English and Spanish by a bilingual aide during the registration process a couple of weeks before school began. Prior to testing, their mother warned the aide that Josefina was very shy and might not answer any questions in either language. When their mother received a copy of the oral language proficiency information, she was not surprised to find that her children were deemed non-proficient in English. However, she was shocked to discover that both children had been declared non-proficient in Spanish as well, and that Braydon might be in need of speech therapy. When the mother questioned this assessment, the aide stated that Josefina would not answer any questions and therefore, she was declared to be non-proficient in Spanish. Braydon

did complete the assessment, but since he spoke Salvadoran Spanish rather than the Mexican Spanish more familiar to the bilingual aide, he was declared to be non-proficient in Spanish. Examples of his “non-proficiency” included the use of vocabulary terms characteristic of Salvadoran Spanish, such as *pizarra* (chalkboard) rather than the Mexican Spanish term, *pizarrón* (chalkboard). It was noted that he used incorrect verb forms, which his mother assumed were in reference to his use of the Salvadoran *vos* (you, informal, singular) form rather than the *tú* form (you, informal singular), which is standard in Mexican Spanish. Finally, Braydon often did not pronounce the phoneme /s/ in many words which is also characteristic of Salvadoran Spanish. This led the aide to suggest that Braydon might be in need of speech therapy.

While it is tempting to dismiss the “non-proficient in any language” designation assigned to the children as an isolated incident, the problematic nature of oral language proficiency assessments in both English and Spanish has been documented in the literature (MacSwan, Rolstad, & Gass, 2002; Pray, 2005). The children’s mother fearing that this “non-non” distinction would influence their teachers’ interactions and instruction of the children, refused to sign off on the assessment. The children would later be tested by the district bilingual coordinator and declared proficient in Spanish.

Literacy Instruction

Braydon and Josefina would experience two cultural learning curves with respect to the school curriculum. Stories about *tamaladas* (tamale making parties), *La Llorona* (the weeping woman), and Day of the Dead altars, part and parcel of the Mexican/Mexican American cultural world of the borderlands, were completely foreign to them. At the same time, curricular materials relating to Halloween, Thanksgiving, the Easter Bunny, and Texas folklore made little sense to the children. As a whole, the curriculum was designed for bilingual, bicultural children of Mexican origin; Braydon and Josefina met neither of these two criteria. They were true beginners in English, and yet most instruction assumed a level of English proficiency that neither of them possessed. Moreover, the curriculum was geared toward bicultural individuals who had a familiarity with both Mexican and American cultural practices. Little effort was made to address their unique linguistic needs or their lack of familiarity with the functions of literacy as defined in the school and community in the U.S.

Josefina

A bilingual graduate student, supervised by a professor from a local university, assessed Josefina’s reading in Spanish before Josefina entered school in the fall. The assessments included the Jerry Johns’ Informal Reading Inventory (IRI)– Spanish, the Tejas Lee: Kindergarten, and Informal Concepts of Print. With respect to her initial concepts of print, Josefina was able to point to a letter, two letters, a word, two words, the first and last letter in a word, and capital and lower case letters. She was unable to point to the book’s cover or title, any punctuation marks, nor a long or short word. She did not know where to start or continue reading, nor was she able to match lower case to uppercase letters. According to the Tejas Lee, she possessed only three out of ten concepts of print. She could identify only two letter names and no letter sounds. She scored one out of six in the area of blending and identification of the initial sound in a word and zero out of six in segmentation. On the Jerry Johns’ IRI Form A – Spanish, Josefina often did not

answer the examiner's questions. Her frustration level was preprimer in the area of listening comprehension. Clearly, she scored well below the literacy level expected for a child who had almost completed the first grade in El Salvador.

Josefina began the first grade in the U.S. in August of 2008. She and her classmates received 90 minutes of language arts instruction per day. While the school was not funded by a Reading First grant, the literacy instruction followed a Reading First model. All literacy instruction was in Spanish until January of 2009 when English texts were introduced for the first time. The first grade reading texts required for use in the Reading First program, in both English and Spanish, were too difficult for Josefina. No individualized, leveled texts were used or sent home. She was also given ten spelling words a week, first in Spanish, and later an additional ten in English, which she had to write three times nightly. Josefina was unable to read any of the spelling words in either language. Her teacher did assign a bilingual buddy to help Josefina during language arts and other subjects. While working with her bilingual buddy, Josefina transferred an important coping skill from her previous literacy activities in the orphanage—copying. She learned to copy everything that her bilingual buddy wrote down or bubbled in. She copied everything that her teacher wrote on the blackboard. Figure 1 illustrates a paper that she brought home from school the first week of school.

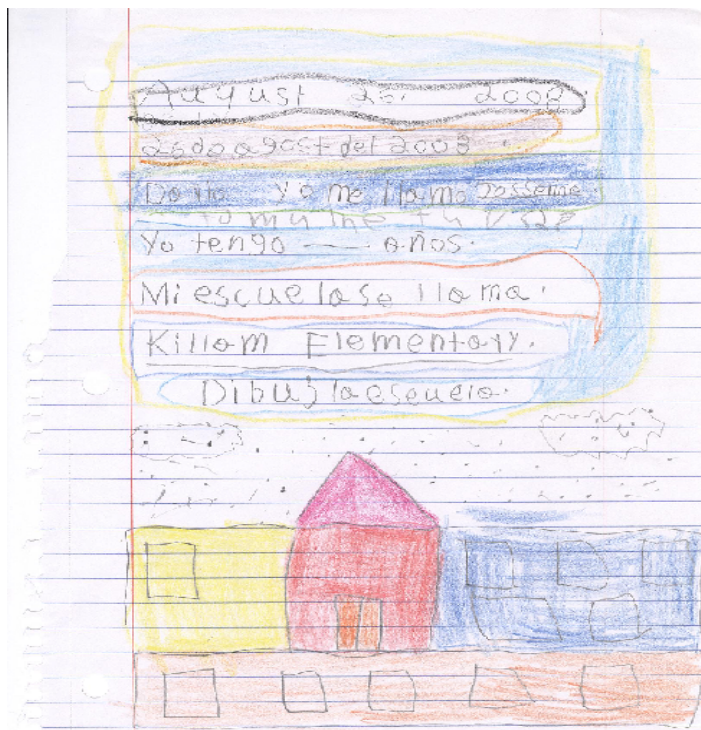


Figure 1. Josefina's paper.

Josefina had copied everything her teacher had written, including the instructions to “Dibuja la escuela” (draw the school). She failed to fill in all the blanks in the sentences, which was the supposed purpose of the activity. Her mother would be asked by the teacher at the end of the first semester to remind Josefina to do her own work and not to copy. She even began copying from environmental print at home. An example of her copying skill was seen in notes

she wrote at home in January of 2009. On one of her notes, she wrote a sentence, “*mamá y papá y nana y Avoid surgery!*” complete with accent marks, exclamation point and capital “A.” On another note, she made the following list, “Shamu, disc, Juanes, Hopscotch.” Shamu and Juanes, are names of celebrities; the former was on cup from SeaWorld, while the latter was on a CD. She could not, however, read anything that she copied when asked later by her mother to do so.

At the conclusion of the first school year in the U.S., the Jerry Johns IRI-Spanish and the Tejas Lee: 1st Grade were administered by a different graduate student at the local university. Table 1 provides a comparison of her scores between the two test administrations of the Tejas Lee.

Table 1

A Comparison of Josefina’s Scores on the Tejas Lee between June of 2008 and June of 2009

| Subtest | Tejas Lee: Kindergarten 2008 | Tejas Lee: 1st Grade 2009 |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Concepts of print | 3/10 | Not Tested |
| Letter names | 2 | Not Tested |
| Letter sounds | 0/14 | 14/14 |
| Blending | 1/6 | 0/5 |
| Segmentation | 0/6 | 0/5 |
| Identification of initial sound in a word | 1/6 | 4/6 |
| Omission of syllable | Not Tested | 0/9 |

The “Words in Isolation” and “Listening Comprehension” portions of the Jerry Johns IRI-Spanish, Form A were also administered in June of 2008 and again in 2009. In June of 2008, Josefina did not recognize any words on the “Words in Isolation” subtest, while in 2009, she recognized only 4 words. She scored at the pre-primer (PP) level on the “Listening Comprehension” section, both in 2008 and 2009.

In comparing Josefina’s scores on the two IRI administrations, it is important to note that in 2008, Josefina did not answer most of the questions, but rather just sat quietly until the examiner continued. Thus, she scored at the frustration level on the IRI assessments. In 2009, while she did respond more frequently, she looked to the examiner for constant reassurance. She was able to decode a few simple words such as *luna* (moon), *bonito* (pretty), *todo* (all), *nido* (nest) when asked to read words in isolation. Because she reached frustration on that section, she

was not asked to read passages. The examiner assessed her listening comprehension, but she reached frustration at the preprimer level.

In sum, after a year in public schools in the U.S., Josefina progressed only in the recognition of isolated letter sounds and initial sounds in words, probably because that was the focus of her instructional program. Josefina was still considered to be a non-reader after one year of instruction in reading. The fact that her scores did not change in listening comprehension in her native language suggests that she was not progressing in her understanding of stories, even in her native language.

Braydon

Braydon's reading development was also assessed in June of 2008 by another graduate student at the reading clinic using the Jerry Johns IRI – Spanish. For reading words in isolation, his independent level was preprimer, his instructional level was at first grade, and his frustration level at second. He scored at an instructional level of preprimer in oral reading word identification. His instructional level for oral reading comprehension was first and his listening comprehension was at fourth grade level. Since Braydon was placed back into second grade when he entered school in the U.S., he should have been scoring as a third grader on these assessments, had he progressed normally up to that point.

Most of his miscues tended to be non-words such as *ocroño* for *otoño* (autumn), *disno* for *pinto* (pinto) and *vieve* for *nieve* (snow). This bilingual examiner, in a manner similar to the examiner who tested the children's language proficiency, initially scored Braydon's omission of the /s/ phoneme as a miscue, for example *Toma* for *Tomás*, *vetirno* for *vestirnos* (to dress ourselves). Once again, it appears that the examiner had little familiarity with Salvadoran Spanish until the supervising professor later pointed out the error in scoring.

Further examples of the effect of this dialect difference were seen in Braydon's invented spelling in June of 2008, *papele* for *papeles* (papers), *suvimo* for *subimos* (we went up) and *ye gamo* for *llegamos* (we arrived) when writing about his flight from El Salvador to the United States.

Braydon began the second grade in August of 2008. He received 90 minutes of language arts per day, which alternated between Spanish and English. During the fall semester, Spanish language arts was taught on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; English language arts was taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The schedule reversed in the spring semester. While the school was not funded by a Reading First grant, the literacy instruction followed a Reading First model. A Scott-Foresman series was used in both languages. About 50% of the time, the Spanish stories were adapted translations of the English texts. No individualized, leveled texts were used or sent home in either language. Spanish literacy instruction focused primarily on comprehension. English literacy instruction focused on decoding and fluency. These distinct foci were apparent even to Braydon as is evident in the vignette at the beginning of the article. When asked to read aloud by his mother in English, Braydon told her in Spanish that she needed to get a stopwatch, because in English people always read with a stopwatch. In contrast, after reading to her in Spanish, Braydon stated that his mother needed to ask him questions about what happened in the story. He also received ten spelling words per week in Spanish and ten in English. Braydon received A's in spelling in English, but rarely knew what any of the words

meant. When his mother attempted to teach him the meaning of some of the spelling words in English, he stated that he didn't have to know what they meant; he only had to know how to spell them. Braydon disliked doing any school-related reading, more so in English than in Spanish. He said that English reading was boring and that he didn't need to do any Spanish reading because he already knew how to read in Spanish. However, he continued to read books about animals, nature and Star Wars at home, occasionally in both languages.

In September of 2008, one month after entering U.S. schools for the first time, Braydon received a referral for the Fast ForWord Language, which was a pull-out program for one hour a day. Fast ForWord Language is a computer-based program that works on phonological processing skills in English. It is grounded in the notion that delayed development in language and reading is due to a child's auditory processing difficulties. His mother refused to agree to the placement. She knew that the independent research base on the effectiveness of Fast ForWord was not favorable (Loeb, Gillam, Hoffman, Brandel & Marquis, 2009; Troia, 2004). Furthermore, she did not believe that Braydon had any auditory processing difficulties, but rather believed that his reading difficulties in English were simply due to the fact that he did not speak English.

Braydon was retested in June of 2009 by another bilingual graduate student at the university, and a comparison of his scores in Spanish between the first and second test administrations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

A Comparison of Braydon's Scores on the Jerry Johns Informal Reading Inventory-Spanish Form A between June of 2008 and June of 2009

| Subtest/Level | June 2008 | | | June 2009 | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| | Independent | Instructional | Frustration | Independent | Instructional | Frustration |
| Words in Isolation | Preprimer | Primer | 1 | Primer | 2 | -- |
| Oral Reading Word Identification | N/A | Primer | 1 | N/A | 2 | 4 |
| Oral Reading Comprehension | Primer | 1 | -- | Preprimer | 2 | 3 |
| Listening Comprehension | -- | 4 | N/A | -- | 3 | 4 |

In June of 2009, Braydon was also tested in English, since he had received reading instruction in English as well as in Spanish in school. Table 3 shows his scores on the English version of the IRI.

Table 3

Braydon's Scores on the Jerry Johns Informal Reading Inventory-Form A in English in June of 2009

| Subtest/Level | Independent | Instructional | Frustration |
|----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| Words in Isolation | Primer | 1 | 2 |
| Oral Reading Word Identification | | | Preprimer |
| Oral Reading Comprehension | | Preprimer | Primer |
| Listening Comprehension | | 1 | 2 |

In comparing the results on the assessments between 2008 and 2009, it is important to note that miscues in Spanish in 2008 were often non-words, while in 2009, they were more meaning-based, e.g. *guardando* (guarding), for *guardado* (guarded), *despacito* (a little slow) for *despacio* (slow).

Braydon showed improvement in both word identification and oral reading comprehension in Spanish, since by the end of second grade he was scoring at a second grade instructional level. His area of greatest improvement was in word identification, both in terms of words in isolation and oral reading. His listening comprehension in Spanish, however, was somewhat surprising, in that he clearly frustrated at a fourth grade level in 2009. On this same test a year earlier, his instructional level was fourth grade in listening comprehension in Spanish. The change in his performance may have been due to added emphasis on word identification and fluency in his instructional program.

In terms of his reading in English, after his first year in school in the U.S., Braydon scored at a preprimer instructional level in oral reading. He scored higher in the recognition of words in isolation, as compared to word recognition in passages, probably due to his ability to memorize word configurations. When reading words in a passage, he probably attended less to the visual configuration of words, because he was reading for meaning. His listening comprehension was at a first grade instructional level in English.

Discussion

Factors in the social environment contributed to the biliteracy development of the children including the scaffolding provided by code-switching among neighborhood children.

However in the educational setting, instruction occurred within a framework in Spanish and English that presupposed a cultural and linguistic background inherent in border communities that was not part of these Salvadoran children's background. Children who have been raised on the border and have attended U.S. preschool and kindergarten programs would have some degree of bilingualism and biculturalism and would be somewhat familiar with U.S. literacy practices (Greybeck & Petrón, 2010).

In analyzing the social context in which these children were raised in El Salvador, it is clear that Braydon and Josefina would not possess an understanding of literacy concepts normally presumed to exist in the background of children raised in the U.S. Examples include the concept of story and the purpose and function of literacy both as an authentic activity in the community and as an enjoyable pastime, so important in early childhood literacy activities in U.S. schools (Tompkins, 2010). Since their life took place within the four walls of the orphanage, they did not have access to literacy practices in the community at large. They may have seen reading and writing used by the social worker when writing notes, but other than that, they probably had not seen literacy used for authentic purposes very often. Even the rich oral storytelling characteristic of many Latino families (Riojas-Cortez, Flores, Smith & Clark, 2003) was in all likelihood absent from their lives since one caregiver was generally in charge of 30-40 children. Instruction in the orphanage had focused on the conventions of written language, including correct letter formation, spacing, capitalization and punctuation. Their literacy tasks appeared to be based on copying from texts and the teacher's writing. Much of their education was related to Catholicism and moral upbringing, rather than academic preparation.

Braydon had some basic literacy skills in Spanish when he came to U.S. He would have benefitted from reading self-selected bilingual texts related to his interests, as suggested by Lira (2000). Instead, he approached the basal reading texts in Spanish as a school task to complete. In his mind, it wasn't necessary to do this task since he thought he already knew how to read in Spanish. He comprehended what he read in Spanish, but found the school texts to be boring. Because the basal texts in English were too difficult, he saw reading as merely saying the words aloud. Since his strength was in memorizing sight words, he was able to accomplish this task easily. However, he understood virtually nothing he read in English, as evidenced by his reading comprehension score of preprimer on the IRI after a year of instruction in the U.S. The endless lists of spelling words, also learned through the process of memorization, may have served to reinforce the notion that comprehension was less important.

Josefina, who should have been in the second grade, had few literacy skills in her first language and lacked oral language development in Spanish; the focus in her first grade classroom in the U.S. should have been on developing basic vocabulary and literacy skills in Spanish rather than adding English to the mix (Krashen, 2000). Spelling lists in any language served no purpose since she was not applying what she learned to reading nor to writing, as she was a non-reader. Little effort was made to tailor instruction to her needs; consequently, she made negligible progress.

Conclusion

Certain basic tenets have emerged as a result of years of research in education. First, it is well established that individual differences must be taken into account in children's literacy development (August, 2006). Second, in the field of second language learning, bilingual program models of various types are better for the long-term literacy development of language minority children than ESL instruction alone (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Just as mainstream educators must recognize diversity, we believe that bilingual educators must be cognizant of linguistic and cultural differences among their students. Examples include recognizing differences in dialect among Spanish speakers and cultural variations among Latinos. Like bilingualism, biculturalism exists on a continuum. Children being raised in the U.S., regardless of their cultural heritage, enter U.S. schools with at least some familiarity with the function and purpose of literacy as it presents itself in the U.S. When they don't have this familiarity, literacy instruction in any language must take into consideration the uniqueness of their linguistic and cultural background.

Instead of assuming a one-size-fits-all mentality with regard to bilingual education, we need to look more closely at the literacy practices taking place in that program. As August (2006) suggests:

Word level skills in literacy such as decoding, word recognition and spelling are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance equal to those of native English speakers. However, this is not the case for text-level skills – reading comprehension and writing. (p. 4-5)

While August makes this assertion for developing literacy in English among second language learners, we assert it is equally important in first language literacy if our goal is biliteracy. Thus, more emphasis needs to be given to the development of oral language, vocabulary and comprehension in bilingual education programs in both languages.

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