



# Foreword

## Squaring Literacy through Biliteracy

Education in the United States is dominated by discourse surrounding the poor performance of American students, especially emergent-bilingual Latino students, on high-stakes standardized exams in English. The Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia at the time of this writing, have been one response to the weak performance of American students in international competitions, such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment).

Kathy Escamilla and her coauthors start the conversation about the education of Latino bilingual students from an alternative angle. *Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action* doesn't apologize for the use of Spanish in the rigorous education of young Latino children to meet literacy standards. Instead, it points to the potential of biliteracy in squaring gains for Latino children whose bilingualism develops as they enter U.S. schools. In addition to changing the conversation about teaching young, Latino bilingual students by insisting that literacy in English and Spanish be squared (i.e., the role of literacy in two languages has equal sides and dimensions, thus multiplying itself and its effects), this book leads to action by educators, as the subtitle suggests. The squaring potential of this book lies not only in the approach to teaching biliteracy that it promotes but also, as I will point out, in the alternative conceptualizations about the instruction and assessment of biliteracy that it presents. Furthermore, the practices have been squared to potential through a multiple approach that has included longitudinal research, as well as implementation of the model in various locations—Texas, Oregon, Colorado, and Washington—with 6,000 children and 300 teachers who have participated in professional development. Thus, the book is not only a how-to-book for teachers; it also makes an important contribution to the field of biliteracy.

The book challenges some of the traditional assumptions that have been made about bilingual students, as well as biliteracy. It focuses not on immigrant children who are often sequential bilinguals, but on those the authors call “the new normal”—bilingual children born in the United States who are developing bilingualism simultaneously as they live in homes and communities where English and Spanish is heard, spoken, and performed. These young bilinguals often have attended preschools where, unfortunately, English is the only language of instruction. Thus, they enter kindergarten with varying degrees of proficiency in English and Spanish, falling at different points of a bilingual continuum. For these children, traditional models of sequential biliteracy, as used in many bilingual education programs, do not make any sense; for, as Merrill Swain pointed out in 1972, bilingualism (and not English or Spanish) is their first language.

This increase of young, simultaneous-bilingual children is a global phenomenon, as witnessed by the attention that Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) has received among international scholars. However, BFLA has not been studied appropriately in U.S. children, mostly because of our fear as Americans that bilingualism could be a native, and not a foreign, phenomenon. This book is unique in pointing out the importance of native-born American bilinguals and the shift in education paradigms that must occur to meet their needs.

In the last decade or so, the concept of superdiversity proposed by Steven Vertovec has persuaded many that efforts to educate for bilingualism and biliteracy were worthless. Escamilla and colleagues remind us that biliteracy is worthwhile and important, especially

for young, Latino bilingual children who continue to be the majority in many U.S. regions. Leaving behind the traditional concept of sequential biliteracy acquisition, this book shows teachers how to engage in what they call “paired literacy,” a concurrent approach to biliteracy instruction in both English and Spanish that mirrors the children’s simultaneous bilingual acquisition. What makes the approach rich and complex is that although it recognizes the importance of what I have called “translanguaging” (the importance of drawing on all the children’s bilingual competencies and engaging in cross-language connections), paired literacy encourages holistic biliteracy instruction and assessment. Holistic in this book refers to the integration of oracy, reading, writing and metalanguage, as well as to seeing biliteracy itself as a distinct system. Holistic also refers to a combined approach—specifically designed for young bilingual students—that provides authentic Spanish literacy instruction and literacy-based English language development. Escamilla and colleagues show that a sheltered English approach simply is insufficient to teach literacy to young, bilingual children. The book guides teachers in making literacy instruction for young, Latino bilingual children explicit while de-emphasizing independent reading. The approach offered for biliteracy instruction is novel and goes beyond traditional approaches that have been proposed specifically to teach emergent bilinguals or monolingual students.

Escamilla and colleagues also demonstrate the relevance of the holistic biliteracy framework for assessment by establishing biliterate reading zones and proposing rubrics that help teachers fully assess bilingual children’s biliteracy. The book also guides educators through lesson planning and creating units that enable children to make connections between Spanish and English literacy, as they draw from each to build their holistic biliteracy.

There is much in this book for teachers, administrators, and scholars. For teachers, in addition to the points mentioned previously, the book contributes original strategies for biliteracy, such as Lotta Lara, *así se dice*, and anchor charts for cross-language connections. For administrators and literacy coaches, the book also includes an observation protocol. For scholars, the book corrects myths about American bilingualism; young, Latino bilingual children; and biliteracy. The holistic approach to teaching and assessing Spanish and English literacy that the book proposes, accompanied by many authentic examples from children and templates for teachers, makes *Biliteracy from the Start* the beginning of a new discourse and new action that will benefit Latino bilingual children.

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