Biliteracy from the Start
Literacy Squared in Action
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Kathy Escamilla
Susan Hopewell
Sandra Butvilofsky
Wendy Sparrow
Lucinda Soltero-González
Olivia Ruiz-Figueroa
Manuel Escamilla

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About the Authors

Kathy Escamilla is a professor in the Division of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research interests center on biliteracy for Spanish-English emerging bilingual children in U.S. schools. Her career in education spans 41 years and she has been a teacher, resource teacher, bilingual program director, and professor.

Susan Hopewell is an assistant professor of education in the Division of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is interested in issues of language, culture, equity, and identity—especially as they affect, or are affected by, (bi)literacy practices. Her K–12 public school teaching experience includes eight years as a classroom teacher in a dual language elementary school and four years as the literacy coach in a maintenance bilingual program.

Sandra Butvilofsky is a research associate with the BUENO Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her interests are in classroom-based research, with a focus on the biliterate writing development of simultaneous bilingual children in elementary schools. Her elementary teaching experience includes five years as a bilingual classroom teacher and five years as a trained Descubriendo la lectura/Reading Recovery teacher. She has been involved in the Literacy Squared research project since 2006.

Wendy Sparrow is a professional research associate at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research interests include the bilingual literacy development of Latino elementary school children and fidelity of program implementation in bilingual and dual language programs and interventions. Before becoming involved in research, she spent seven years as a bilingual elementary classroom teacher and Title I literacy instructor in the public school setting.

Lucinda Soltero-González is an assistant professor of education in the division of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She was an elementary school teacher and a bilingual special education teacher for over seven years before earning her doctorate in language, reading, and culture from the University of Arizona. Her research interests include the development of bilingualism and early biliteracy in young Spanish-speaking children and biliteracy practices in U.S. schools.

Olivia Ruiz-Figueroa worked in Tucson Unified School District for 22 years as a classroom bilingual education teacher, Title 1 reading teacher, and a Descubriendo la lectura/Reading Recovery teacher leader. She was one of the original authors of the Spanish reconstruction of Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery program. Growing up in a bilingual/bicultural home, she continues to focus on assessment, instruction, and cultural equity for emerging bilingual students being educated in the United States.

Manuel Escamilla earned a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, with an emphasis in early childhood education, from the University of Kansas. He has been a Head Start program director and has spent most of his professional life working with parents to improve the higher-education opportunities for their children. He is a project director for the BUENO Center for Multicultural Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder.
Preface

This book is for teachers, administrators, instructional leaders, curriculum developers, professional development providers, assessment and evaluation specialists, policymakers, and advocates who expect their emerging bilingual students to develop biliteracy. It is grounded in ten years of research, instruction, assessment, and professional development in elementary school bilingual programs that serve emerging bilingual students from Spanish-speaking homes. The holistic biliteracy framework at the center of this work can be adapted and applied to any context that provides instruction through two languages with the explicit goal and anticipated outcome of biliteracy for all students.

History and Development of Literacy Squared

In 2004, two of the authors conducted an intensive session at the National Association for Bilingual Education Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The title of the session was, “Transitions to Biliteracy: Structures and Strategies.” Our primary purpose was to argue that transitions in bilingual and dual language programs should emphasize transitions to biliteracy rather than the more typical transitions to English. A secondary purpose was to discuss how to develop cross grade-level trajectories to ensure successful transitions, preferably to biliteracy, but also to English medium classrooms. More than 350 educators, including practitioners, researchers, and school administrators attended the session, and we engaged in a dialogue about the state of the field. Together, we concluded that issues in transition were among the most challenging in all program models, including bilingual education, dual language, and English as a second language (ESL). Specifically, we noted the following:

- Transition is somewhat of an oxymoron; children are in bilingual or ESL programs with native language support one day and in all English instruction the next. Many schools have transition criteria (e.g., test score cutoffs, time in program). However, they lack transition strategies for teachers to implement or mechanisms to monitor and guide these transitions. There is, in fact, no true transition between languages (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008).
- There are few, if any, transitional curriculum materials and/or assessments, particularly in literacy, to assist teachers in helping children transition from one language to another (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Teachers do not feel prepared to adequately address transition issues (Gersten, 1996), and transitional classrooms are places where children report feeling a great deal of stress (Pappamihiel, 2001).
- Transition frequently means transition to English, with little or no emphasis placed on transition to biliteracy (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Little research is available to guide practice with regard to transitioning children from one language to another (Gersten, 1996; Saunders, O’Brien, Lennon, McLean, 1998).

In short, we concluded that while the concepts of transition and transfer had been discussed abstractly in the field, they had not yet been operationalized adequately in schools and classrooms. We recognized a dire need to help children and teachers make more successful transitions between languages both in instructional practices and assess-
ment. As we complete this book in 2013, we note that this continues to be a critical issue (Beeman & Urow, 2013).

In 2004, we agreed to develop a research plan, along with an instructional model and assessment plan, to examine how programs of bilingual and dual language education could enhance the development of trajectories toward biliteracy. We were further motivated when some of the educators in the audience volunteered their schools and districts to be participants in any research related to the development of the proposed project.

In the fall of 2004, we convened a group of researchers and practitioners to conceptualize Literacy Squared and its four components: research, assessment, professional development, and the holistic biliteracy instructional framework. As we met and planned we conducted an extensive review of literature that led us to create a model that challenges some of the traditionally held paradigms about language and literacy instruction in bilingual/dual language and ESL programs. Our holistic biliteracy framework was novel in its paired literacy focus, connected literacy environments, and goal of biliteracy development rather than transition to English. Our framework demanded that assessments of emerging biliteracy be aligned with the holistic biliteracy framework and we achieved this through the development of novel ways of interpreting existing reading and writing assessments in English and Spanish.

Further, we agreed that a new instructional and assessment model for building trajectories toward biliteracy had to be comprehensive. The formal name for this project and this book, Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action, has been chosen because it captures our belief that best practice involves building trajectories toward biliteracy using both Spanish and English, beginning in kindergarten. The word “squared” indicates the exponential potential of literacy in two languages.

This book is the result of the past decade of research, professional development, and classroom implementation of Literacy Squared. Over the course of the past nine years, we have created a theoretical framework for developing biliteracy via paired literacy instruction; conducted an extensive review of literature to examine the most current research on transition and transfer; concluded a pilot study to examine the potential of the holistic biliteracy framework; completed two different longitudinal studies, each three years in length, to examine the reading and writing development and outcomes for children participating in Literacy Squared classrooms; developed an observational matrix for assessing fidelity of implementation of the model in research classrooms; and initiated a third phase of research and implementation. Participating school districts have included three districts in Texas, one district in Oregon, four districts in Colorado, and, most recently, a district in Washington. Over time, the project has involved over 6,000 children and 300 teachers. Our work is ongoing and iterative. Research informs practice, practice informs professional development and research, and all partners learn from and with each other.

How to Use This Book

Teachers and administrators in any type of bilingual program (e.g., transitional, dual language) or native/home/heritage language arts classes (e.g., Spanish language arts) can use the following features from Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action:

- The innovative holistic biliteracy instructional framework for grades K–5 to strengthen biliteracy development for emerging bilingual students
- Paired literacy instruction and assessment
- Empirically based biliterate reading trajectories, benchmarks, and zones that offer concrete biliteracy targets and anticipated outcomes for students from Spanish-speaking homes in well-implemented bilingual programs
- Assessment practices and techniques to monitor and document children’s trajectories toward biliteracy
- A curriculum development process to create units for biliteracy instruction that align with state content (e.g., Common Core) and language development standards (e.g., English- and Spanish-language development standards; new and home language arts progressions)
When educators use the holistic biliteracy framework, with its focus on paired literacy instruction and assessment, they can expect to transform teaching and learning effectively at the classroom and program levels.

The biliterate reading trajectories, benchmarks, and zones can also be used by dual language educators. However, educators cannot uncritically assume the same numerical values because of the differences in their target populations (e.g., two-way dual language programs include students from monolingual English-speaking homes) and their content and language allocation plans (e.g., dual language programs offer may more instructional time in Spanish). Therefore, dual language educators need to develop empirically based biliterate reading trajectories, benchmarks, and zones based on longitudinal evidence of how their students (from monolingual English-speaking homes, bilingual homes, or monolingual Spanish-speaking homes) develop reading in two languages over time using DRA2, EDL2, or other appropriate measures. Given that, by definition, dual language programs provide a minimum of 50% and a maximum of 90% of content-area instruction in the partner language (e.g., Spanish), we should expect to find stronger outcomes for all students over time.

Educators working to develop a coherent and coordinated Common Core–aligned language arts block that has allotted time dedicated to English language arts, native or home language arts (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic), and ESL can use the holistic biliteracy framework to inform their language policy, structure their programs, align curriculum development across languages, stimulate creative ways to team-teach, and document student trajectories toward biliteracy. Teachers can use language development standards or progressions to differentiate instruction and assessment for the emerging bilinguals in their classes.

**Special Features**

This book has many features that make the Literacy Squared holistic biliteracy framework accessible and practicable, including the following:

- A model for paired literacy instruction—learning to read and write in two languages, beginning in kindergarten
- An expanded definition of literacy instruction that includes oracy and metalanguage as well as reading and writing
- Authentic methods to interpret the development of Spanish and English reading and writing
- Clear content- and language-allocation policy recommendations for an elementary school language arts block with dedicated time allotted to authentic Spanish literacy and literacy-based ELD
- Guidance for teachers in how to make explicit and direct connections between Spanish and English literacy environments
- Innovative Literacy Squared teaching approaches, including Lotta Lara, theDictado,* and *así se dice*
- Lesson plans, activity structures, instructional routines, student work, and assessment practices that illustrate Literacy Squared in action
- Detailed analyses of student writing side by side using the Literacy Squared writing rubric that provides strong models of paired literacy instruction and assessment across grade levels
- Literacy Squared observation protocol template that educators can use to monitor, evaluate, and strengthen implementation of instructional and assessment approaches.

The Literacy Squared writing rubric, observation protocol, and lesson planning template can also be found at casloncommunity.com/Biliteracy-from-the-Start/.

Overall the purpose of this book is to celebrate biliteracy, and to provide educators with strategies and structures to improve the biliteracy potential of Spanish-speaking children in U.S. schools.

*We invented the term “theDictado” to reflect the bilingual focus of this method in Literacy Squared.
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.

—Ofelia García, Graduate Center, City University of New York
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