10 Key Policies and Practices for Teaching Reading in English-Spanish Bilingual Programs

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—

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In the United States, most bilingual programs provide instruction in English and in Spanish. In general, there are three different types of bilingual programs: transitional, dual-language one-way, and dual-language two-way.

In transitional programs, native Spanish speakers learn in Spanish until their English skills are strong enough to participate in an English-only setting. The goal is to use student assets in Spanish to learn English. In dual-language one-way bilingual programs, native Spanish speakers learn in both languages to maximize the advantage of speaking two languages. In dual-language two-way programs, native Spanish speakers and native English speakers learn in Spanish and in English. The goal is for all students to become proficient in both languages.

The success of bilingual programs, as demonstrated by experimental research and outcomes on state standardized assessments, is dependent on the use of effective practices. In this guide, we provide specific recommendations on evidence-based practices for bilingual reading instruction that can be implemented in any bilingual program, including programs in languages other than Spanish and English.

1 Understand that the core components of beginning reading are the same in all alphabetic languages, including English and Spanish.

The Components

Phonological awareness: Phonological awareness refers to understanding that words are made of syllables and sounds. For example, in Spanish, the word *mesa* is made of two syllables (*me* and *sa*) and four distinct sounds (/m/, /e/, /s/, /a/). Spanish has 22 to 24 sounds, and English has 42 to 44 phonemes. The exact number depends on the region.

Alphabetic principle: The alphabetic principle refers to students learning that in alphabetic languages, letters are symbols for sounds. Spanish and English are both alphabetic languages. The Spanish alphabet has 27 letters plus three digraphs (*rr*, *ll*, *ch*). The Spanish digraphs can be taught separately from the letters *r*, *c*, and *l* because these digraphs represent distinct sounds. In certain words, such as *bilingüe* and *pingüino*, two dots are added to the letter *u* when it is between a *g* and an *e* or a *g* and an *i*. English has 26 letters (it does not have the *ñ*), plus many phoneme-grapheme corresponding rules that determine how letter combinations are pronounced.

Fluency: Fluency refers to students reading text with a certain speed, accuracy, and rhythm to aid understanding. Fluency is often referred to as the bridge between word reading and reading comprehension. Low fluency has been strongly associated with reading difficulties.

Vocabulary: Vocabulary refers to students learning the meaning of words. Academic vocabulary is broadly defined as the vocabulary learned in school to support the understanding of fiction and informational text. In bilingual settings, academic vocabulary needs to be taught in Spanish and English because a simple translation is not enough for students to understand concepts in depth.

Reading comprehension: Reading comprehension refers to understanding what a text says, literally and inferentially. Bilingual students can use the same comprehension strategies (e.g., summarizing, asking ques-

tions, monitoring comprehension, rereading) to understand text in Spanish and in English. These strategies need to be taught explicitly and practiced daily.

Oral language proficiency: Oral language proficiency is an important component of learning to read. Bilingual students should have regular conversations in Spanish and English related to the lesson content to support the development of their native language and their second-language proficiency.

2 **Use explicit instruction to show students the transfer of phonological awareness and decoding from Spanish to English and vice versa.**

Even though Spanish and English are both alphabetic languages, beginning readers need explicit instruction to understand the connections between the two languages. Explicit instruction refers to the teacher explaining the task, modeling the answer, providing examples that teachers and students can do together, scaffolding the tasks to ensure that students are successful when responding, providing many opportunities for students to practice the task, correcting errors immediately by going back to the model, and reviewing regularly for students to connect what they have learned before with new content.

Scenario

Ms. García is a kindergarten bilingual teacher in a dual-language two-way program. Today, she will teach students how to segment sounds in two-syllable words in Spanish (e.g., *mesa*). First, Ms. García points to a table and says, "Esto es una mesa. ¿Qué es?" [This is a table. What is it?] Ms. García then explains the task briefly. She says, "Hoy vamos a aprender a dividir palabras en sonidos. Lo hago yo primero. La palabra es *mesa*. Los sonidos en *mesa* son /m/, /e/, /s/, /a/." [Today, we will practice dividing words into sounds. I will do it first. The word is *mesa*. The sounds in *mesa* are /m/, /e/, /s/, /a/.] Ms. García lifts a finger to show students when she is saying an individual sound. She repeats the same activity with the word *gato*.

Then she practices the activity together with the whole class. She says, "Ahora vamos a hacerlo juntos. Yo digo una palabra y cuando levante un dedo, ustedes me dicen un sonido de la palabra." [Now we will do it together. I will say a word, and when I lift a finger, we will say the sounds of the word.]

Ms. García then provides students with opportunities to practice the task. She says, "Su turno. Yo digo la palabra y ustedes me dicen todos los sonidos en la palabra." [Your turn. I will say a word, and you will tell me all the sounds you hear in the word.] "La palabra es *papá*." [The word is *papá*.]

When the whole class has practiced the task with five or six words, Ms. García provides individual turns. If students make a mistake, Ms. García says, "Mi turno. Los sonidos en *papá* son /p/, /a/, /p/, /a/." [My turn. The sounds in *papá* are /p/, /a/, /p/, /a/]. She then asks the whole class to say the sounds before asking the student who made the mistake to respond.

Ms. García uses the same type of explicit instruction to teach the skill in English. She says, "We will sound out words in English. This activity is the same as the one we did during Spanish reading instruction, but now, we will use English words."

3 **Consider the differences between the Spanish and English orthographic systems when teaching phonological awareness and decoding.**

Teach the sounds of syllables and phonemes in Spanish early. Teaching letter sounds within syllables is necessary for students to read any word, even a multisyllabic word with less common syllabic patterns such as *astronauta*. *Astronauta* has four distinct syllables: *as*, *tro*, *nau*, *ta*. Learning 30 letter sounds in Spanish can be more efficient than learning 945 syllables.

See the following guides from the 10 Key series for more information on teaching early reading skills in English:

- Elementary school reading:
  www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Keys_Reading_Web_Revised.pdf
- Middle and high school reading:
  www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Keys_Secondary_Web.pdf

4 **Consider the differences between the Spanish and English grammatical systems when teaching reading comprehension.**

The Spanish and English grammatical systems vary in the way sentences are structured and in grammatical features. For example, Spanish verbs have more conjugations than English verbs. Nouns, pronouns, and adjectives in Spanish have gender agreement (e.g., *la mesa* but *el árbol*), and sentences do not always start with a subject (e.g., "Ellos vuelven a la casa" is as correct as "Vuelven a la casa"). However, in the second example, it is not clear who is returning home: all the boys, boys and girls, or all the girls. Thus, the context of the sentence is the only clue students have to understand the subject of the sentence. Other differences include the use of the apostrophe in English to indicate the possessive adjective (e.g., "I went to my friend's house"), which does not exist in Spanish.

Scenario

Mr. Peso is a fourth-grade teacher in a two-way bilingual immersion program. Today, he asks students to read a story about Ellen Ochoa, a famous Latina astronaut, in Spanish. Before reading the sentence "El padre de Ellen fue a la casa de su abuelo," Mr. Peso asks students to rephrase the sentence to indicate what Ellen's father did. Most students said that he went to his grandfather's house. However, based on the story, Ellen's father went to **her** grandfather's house. This confusion is common because the possessive adjective (*su*) does not have a gender, and Spanish does not use apostrophes. Mr. Peso explains this to the students and then models a think-aloud on what he did to understand the meaning of *su*.

After reading the story, Mr. Peso asks students to write a story summary in Spanish and provide an explanation of why they would consider Ms. Ochoa their hero. Before starting the assignment, Mr. Peso provides a model of a summary he wrote on one of his heroes: Roberto Clemente, a famous baseball player from Puerto Rico. He also explains some of the differences between writing in English and writing in Spanish. For example, Mr. Peso reminds students about not using the apostrophe when they write in Spanish and using the Spanish punctuation conventions (e.g., ¡!, ¿?). Mr. Peso references the poster that shows the English and Spanish punctuation rules and examples of the use of the apostrophe in English and the possessive adjective in Spanish.

5 **Provide academic vocabulary instruction in both English and Spanish.**

Academic vocabulary includes words students are familiar with (e.g., *active*, *possible*), words specific to subject areas (e.g., *subtract*, *mammal*, *lawyer*), and words used and understood by mature language users (e.g., *dispose*, *rigid*, *release*). There are many cognates between English and Spanish academic words, particularly those that stem from Latin roots (e.g., *crear* and *create*, *atención* and *attention*, *social* and *social*) and those whose origin is English (e.g., *computer* and *computadora, television* and *televisión*). However, it is not always easy for students in the elementary grades to identify cognates because they often sound different in the two languages and are often spelled differently (e.g., *occur* versus *ocurrir*). Teachers should teach cognates explicitly so that students can identify them easily. However, a heavy reliance on cognates can be deceiving, given that some words might be false cognates, which have different meanings in Spanish and in English. One example is the word *embarazada* in Spanish, which means "pregnant" and sounds very similar to *embarrassed* (i.e., ashamed) in English.

See the following guides from the 10 Key series for more information on vocabulary instruction:

- Vocabulary:
  www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Key_Vocabulary_WEB.pdf
- English language learners:
  www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Key_ELLs_Web_Rev.pdf

6 **Integrate reading and writing in the same language.**

Reading and writing are closely related. Research indicates that children who are strong readers are more likely to be strong writers and vice versa. To accomplish biliteracy, reading and writing lessons should be taught in the same language. For example, on a day when reading instruction is in Spanish, writing instruction should also be in Spanish. Matching the language during reading and writing helps students build vocabulary, recognize grammatical patterns, and use the information they learned during reading instruction to develop their writing skills.
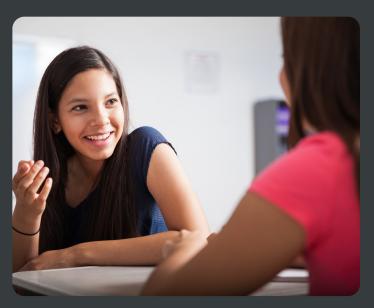
Scenario

Ms. García teaches half of each day in English and the other half in Spanish. The content she teaches in each language flips each consecutive day. However, she pairs her reading and writing time during the morning so that her students read and write in Spanish on Monday and in English on Tuesday.

Mr. Peso follows a 2-week schedule to teach in English and Spanish. He pairs reading and writing in Spanish for 2 weeks and then switches to English reading and writing for 2 weeks.

7 Accept code-switching when the purpose of the lesson is understanding content using students' bilingual assets.

Code-switching (sometimes called translanguaging) refers to using both languages when speaking or writing. Code-switching typically occurs when certain words or sentences are retrieved more easily in the native or second language (e.g., "A scientist es una persona que explora the world and how things work") or to foster identity and community building among bilinguals (e.g., "Vamos al drive-in cine después de comer"). Code-switching is common when students are learning two languages. It does not confuse students; instead, it provides them with the opportunity to use their bilingual assets to understand the content. Teachers can rephrase what students say in the language of instruction.

Scenario

Mr. Peso is getting ready to teach a synchronous (live instruction) online science lesson about volcanoes in English. As a warm-up activity, Mr. Peso asks students to talk to their partners in breakout rooms about what they know about volcanoes. While students are talking, Mr. Peso listens to the conversations. Juan says, "Volcanoes erupt because of the heat adentro." Mr. Peso paraphrases Juan's sentence in English. "Yes, Juan. Volcanoes erupt because the heat inside the volcano needs to be released."

8 Use formative assessments to screen students with potential reading difficulties and monitor their growth in Spanish, English, or both.

Monitor students' reading development in both languages regularly to ensure that students are making adequate progress in English and in Spanish. Students often perform at different reading levels, depending on the target language. Therefore, ongoing brief assessments should be used to differentiate instruction and to provide additional supports to students.

See the reading intervention guide from the 10 Key series for more information on formative assessments:
www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Key_ReadingIntervention_WEB-Rev2.pdf

Scenario

Mr. Peso assesses his students regularly using brief reading measures. At the beginning of the year, Mr. Peso noticed that Laura, a native Spanish speaker, is a strong reader in Spanish. However, her English assessments indicate that her English reading comprehension is slightly below grade level. Sam, a native English speaker in the same classroom, follows a similar trend. He is a strong English reader but struggles with Spanish reading comprehension.

Based on the results of the assessments, Mr. Peso modifies his small-group instruction for Laura and Sam to address their reading comprehension in their second language. He re-evaluates the progress his students are making and regroups according to their reading needs.

9   Provide differentiated reading instruction in Spanish and in English.

Differentiated instruction in bilingual settings can have a variety of formats based on student assets and needs. Sometimes, English-speaking students need additional support in their Spanish reading comprehension. Other times, native Spanish speakers and native English speakers need additional support in their phonological awareness skills. When differentiating for students with advanced reading skills, use texts that are challenging but accessible and promote independent reading for meaning and for pleasure. Differentiated reading instruction can be done in person (e.g., at a small-group table, in pods) or online (e.g., in breakout rooms, during specialized time frames).

Scenario

Mr. Peso teaches reading via a digital platform this year. Using data he has collected from ongoing assessments, he identified five students who are advanced Spanish readers. Mr. Peso decides to practice reading comprehension strategies in Spanish with the group in a breakout room. Mr. Peso leads discussions about differences between narrative and expository texts. He also uses think-alouds to demonstrate how proficient readers make inferences. Finally, he promotes metacognitive strategies to help students assess their own comprehension. Mr. Peso then asks students to practice these strategies with another chapter of the book while he moves into another breakout room, where students are reading a below-grade-level book. Mr. Peso uses the same reading comprehension strategies with this group. The same comprehension strategies can be used in Spanish and in English.

Instruction to Address Different Student Needs

Phonological Awareness

- Teach syllabication explicitly.
- Teach phonemic segmentation and blending.

Phonics

- Teach word constructs systematically with word sorts and picture sorts.
- Teach affixes explicitly.
- Integrate compound and complex words as students progress.

Vocabulary

- Provide leveled books that include the target vocabulary.
- Implement an essential words routine.
- Teach semantic mapping.

Fluency

- Provide opportunities for students to practice fluency reading aloud or in silence.
- Promote independent progress monitoring with graphing and reinforcement.

Comprehension

- Use leveled questions and support higher-order thinking.
- Teach constructs of text organization for narrative and expository texts.
- Implement think-alouds to demonstrate inference of meaning.
- Promote metacognitive strategies.
- Provide many opportunities for students to develop their language proficiency through text discussions.

10 Provide structured opportunities for discussions in Spanish and in English.

Oral communication is a core component of learning languages and academic content. Bilingual students need to have frequent opportunities to verbally communicate with teachers and peers in both target languages. Build purposeful time for students to speak in both languages.

Examples

Below are some strategies that Ms. García and Mr. Peso use on a regular basis. Before using the strategies, both teachers explain the expectations to ensure that all students know what to do during group activities.

Group learning activities: Students work in small groups (three to five students) on a task or activity. Select students in the small groups based on their language proficiency to ensure that all students can participate.

Peer-assisted learning strategies: Students work in pairs on reading activities. One student takes the role of tutor and the other the tutee. The tutee reads aloud, and the tutor provides feedback on the reading and the strategies used. Then, the roles are flipped.

Self-monitoring strategies: These strategies reinforce the use of a target language during a specified time. Students set goals for how many times they use English during a Spanish reading lesson and then tally their uses of English. They then graph the results and check whether they are consistently achieving their goals of language use.

Games: Some games promote target language use—for example, Scrabble en español or traditional Scrabble. Set expectations for matching oral communication to the target language.

Cultural learning activities: Create a designated cultural learning time where students mix between classrooms and grade levels. Teachers and students can share culturally relevant topics or experiences in other countries to promote cultural understanding and the value of being bilingual.

Reference: Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/english_learners_pg_040114.pdf

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