

Supporting Early Spanish Literacy in Dual Language Classrooms

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Importance of Native Language Instruction

Native language instruction is the core of all bilingual program models, including dual language. Research has repeatedly shown that a child who learns to read in his primary language (L1) first has a greater degree of success in an English curriculum than the child who does not. A person learns to read only once. The process of acquiring the necessary decoding skills to “break the code” is a learned process. These acquired skills transfer to the second language (L2) and do not have to be “relearned.” This foundation in the primary language assists English language learners (ELLs) in achieving a successful and smooth transition to—or addition of—English. It also helps Spanish language learners (SLLs) by teaching them the sound system in Spanish and providing an underlying structural mechanism that helps them learn to read in their second language.

Not a Direct Translation

Some Spanish literacy programs are a direct translation of the English version, which is a recipe for disaster. Teaching beginning Spanish literacy is different than teaching beginning English literacy because the linguistic nature of the two languages is different. Some educational companies have attempted to teach Spanish phonics the same way they teach English phonics. This is flawed thinking and based on an incorrect premise that literacy development in English and Spanish are the same or very similar.

Below are some examples highlighting the differences between early literacy development in English and Spanish. These differences need to be considered

carefully when making a decision to purchase a literacy program in Spanish.

When to Teach Phonemic Awareness

Research on phonemic awareness in English indicates that it should be taught in the pre-reading stage, and in fact, is a precursor to learning to read (Adams, 1990). Research done in Mexico yields very different results (Vernon & Ferreiro, 1999, 2000). For Spanish-speaking students, phonemic and phonological awareness are *not* precursors to reading in Spanish, but are integral to the reading process and should be taught concurrently with reading *and* writing.

Sound-to-Symbol Correspondence

With few exceptions, there is a direct sound-to-symbol correspondence in Spanish. English does not have this direct correspondence. This makes the decoding process much easier in Spanish than in English.

Vowels or Consonants First?

Research has demonstrated that vowels are best taught before consonants in early Spanish reading instruction (Escamilla, 1999; Ferreiro, Pellicer, Rodríguez, Silva & Vernon, 1994). This is the opposite of English programs in which consonants are taught first. In Spanish, there are only five vowel sounds. American English has about sixteen different vowel sounds, represented by numerous spellings. This presents one of the biggest obstacles for children learning to read in English, regardless of language dominance. Children who learn to read in Spanish can more easily “break the code” because of this one-to-one correspondence.

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English	Spanish
Phonemic awareness taught in the prereading stage	Phonemic awareness taught concurrently with reading and writing
Not a direct sound to symbol correspondence	Direct sound to symbol correspondence
Consonants before vowels	Vowels before consonants
Letter names taught before/in conjunction with initial sounds	Letter names taught after initial sounds
16 vowel sounds	5 vowel sounds
Key phonological structure: Onset & rime	Key phonological structure: Syllable unit
Monosyllabic words common and typically used in beginning reading instruction.	Very few monosyllabic words; two and three-syllable words common in beginning reading instruction
Words sounded out by individual sounds (d-o-g)	Words sounded out by syllables (ca – sa)



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Letter Names vs. Letter Sounds

In English, letter names are traditionally taught before or in conjunction with letter sounds. Most letter names in English closely approximate their sound. In Spanish, many letter names are multisyllabic and therefore do not have a direct relationship to their sound (*jota, efe, i griega*, etc.). In spite of this, many beginning Spanish reading programs begin with letter names or teach them concurrently with their sound.

Onset-Rime Blending and Segmentation vs. Syllable Blending and Segmentation

One of the key differences between Spanish and English literacy development is the onset-rime structure in English versus the syllable unit in Spanish. Beginning reading material in English is dominated by one-syllable words made of three letters (CVC), such as cap, hat, sun, tip, etc. Beginning English literacy instruction is built around the onset-rime structure in these one-syllable words (c-ap).

The situation is very different in Spanish, however. Research has indicated that the syllable is a more important unit of phonological awareness in Spanish (Carreiras, Alvarez, and De Vega, 1993). Spanish is an alphabetic language with a regular and well-defined syllabic structure. Spanish literacy instruction utilizes syllables when segmenting and blending words, *not* onset-rime. One-syllable CVC words are few. It is much more common that the CVC structure is a syllable within a word (i.e. cam-po, vi-ven, etc.). In English, words are typically sounded out letter by letter, i.e., c-a-t. In Spanish, words are typically sounded out syllable by syllable, i.e., ca-sa. Beginning literacy programs in Spanish *must* be built around the syllable unit.

Effective Spanish Literacy Programs

Spanish literacy programs that are built upon the linguistic backbone of the Spanish language are most effective in teaching children to read, filling a need for primary language development and assisting English learners in acquiring the tools to decode beginning reading material. Additionally, Spanish learners easily learn to decode in their second language. This early instruction gives both ELL and SLL students a strong foundation on which to build dual literacy.

What is Estrellita?

The *Estrellita Accelerated Beginning Spanish Reading Program* is a supplementary, accelerated, beginning Spanish reading program for pre-k through first grade students in bilingual education classrooms. *Estrellita*...

- provides in-depth, scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency;
- is based on the core structure of the Spanish language and is not a direct translation;
- maps beginning sounds to pictures to assist children in making the connection from the known (picture) to the unknown (symbol representing the beginning sound);
- introduces vowels before consonants. The program also provides a built-in review process to ensure that students retain previously learned sounds;
- teaches the letter sounds first and delays the teaching of letter names until children have “broken the code;”
- utilizes a syllabic approach to blending and segmentation which systematically builds upon itself; and
- provides layers of differentiated instruction for a range of student needs.



* **NEW:** Estrellita RTI Component: a safety net for struggling readers! *

* **NEW:** Estrellita Placement Test & Benchmark Assessment Tool *

* **Jumpstart** into reading *

* Used in **Two-Way Dual-Immersion Classrooms** *

