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Building Literacy in Spanish and English Bilingual Education Alive and Well in Kansas

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My wife began working with our six-year-old son on reading and writing skills early in the summer because, even with soccer lessons, tennis lessons, basketball lessons, pottery classes, painting classes, drama classes and four or five different vacation Bible schools, our boy had too much "down time" at home without regular school attendance.

There is a lot of good research showing that building a child's literacy skills in their first language will equip them conceptually for grafting onto their neural pathways further literacy skills in a second or third language as well. Bill VanPatten explains the theory behind these processes very nicely in a book, "[From Input to Output](#)," as well as in several talks he gave at the Kansas TESOL meeting in 2004:

[Keynote A](#)

[Keynote B](#)

Our son's first language, thanks to the attentiveness of his mother, a native Spanish speaker from Colombia, is Spanish. At the end of every summer, and sometimes at holiday season, he gets the chance to communicate 24/7 in Spanish during a visit to the home of his Abuelita in Florida. The grandparents are so happy and proud of their grandson's Spanish speaking ability. He even said happy birthday to his great-grandmother in Colombia on the phone a few weeks ago, when she turned 90.

Spanish is a great language for learning how to read because the sound system maps very precisely and regularly onto the writing system. This regularity of the sound-symbol relationships makes it much easier than English for reading out loud as skills are just beginning to develop. I'm pretty sure that phonemic awareness is not quite as popular a money-making scheme in Spanish-speaking school systems as it is in the U.S., with the complex array of sound-symbol relationships in English.

Our boy's Spanish reading skills are growing very quickly. At first, he would read simpler books for practice out loud, whereas his mother would read to him (as she has always) from longer stories. One of their real favorites is the "Casa del Arbol" series.

His writing has developed more slowly, but he is very interested in, for

example, writing lists of items for his Abuelita to buy for him, and writing simple messages in Spanish. He can now compose in Spanish very nicely, writing new ideas and explaining things with good detail.

When the school year arrived, he brought his advanced reading skills to bear on the challenges of reviewing the English sound/symbol system and trying to read English texts out loud. At first, he was frustrated, stating that he believed English was completely different from Spanish, and lacking the confidence in his ability to sound out words.

However, over the first month or so of school, he has continued making an effort to read (and write) English, and he is now reading English much more fluently than before. His daily Spanish lessons with his mother, including now mathematics using an abacus, are continuing. He reads out loud in Spanish while we are driving, while we are sitting anywhere, just so happy to be reading.

Recently, the past week or two, his mother has also incorporated in their daily study time an activity in which she dictates certain English sentences and Bill guesses the spelling as he writes them out. My wife reports that he embraces this challenge very enthusiastically, seemingly even more interested in sorting out English than Spanish (we do live in Kansas). Everywhere we go, my son is reading the signs and spelling out words for practice.

School personnel have responded very positively to our son's bilingual ability and our aspirations that he develop full literacy in both of his languages. My wife has been invited to work with children in the school on basic Spanish skills, which she is enjoying immensely as well.

Sometimes it is nice to be able to step outside the media battles and research duels over bilingual education and the role of first language literacy in second language development. We see the results every day. To really implement our plans for him to fully develop his Spanish skills in the context of grade level content, throughout his schooling, we are going to have to "go back to school" ourselves and enable ourselves to provide that content in Spanish. We are also considering spending a year or so in a Spanish-speaking environment in the future, so that our son can attend school in a community that values Spanish most highly.

By Robb Scott

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