Supporting Students as Writers across Languages

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The books reviewed in this issue were chosen because of their contributions to insights and inquiries in literacy education. The first book reviewed is *Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate against the Odds* by María de la Luz Reyes. It is an incredibly powerful collection of narratives written by greatly respected educators reflecting on their own histories in becoming biliterate and bilingual despite schools that attempted to eradicate their home languages. Reflecting not only history but current issues in schools and society, this book creates an essential foundation for a range of inquiries in literacy education (within and beyond the teaching of writing). In this context, it sets the scene for the other two reviews by dispelling “the myth that [using more than one language in the classroom] is an obstacle to learning.”

The second book is Danling Fu’s *Writing between Languages: How English Language Learners Make the Transition to Fluency*. It was selected for its brilliance in taking us into the writing lives of English language learners by providing concrete examples of students’ work as teachers encourage and support the use of multiple languages.

The third review addresses Katie Wood Ray and Matt Glover’s latest volume (text and video) of inspirational insights and live classroom demonstrations for teachers of young writers in *Sit Down and Teach Up*. Their ebook takes us deeply into the worlds of teachers and students to further explore what it means to sit down with diverse writers, seek to understand their worlds, experiences, and expertise as young authors, and then offer specific, focused support that moves them forward.

Thus, we have chosen to review books that build on NCTE’s long-time focus on the writerly lives of students, as well as on a new NCTE resolution, *Student’s Right to Write in Heritage and Home Languages*—a resolution that rides on the shoulders of NCTE’s policies in support of students’ home languages (African American Language, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, and so on) as important linguistic resources in the classroom. While each book stands alone as an important volume in itself, these books can also work together to help educators understand why we have a responsibility to champion the development of students’ positive identities as users of languages other than English; how to teach in ways that allow students to embrace multiple linguistic codes as they write between languages; and how to teach within beautifully diverse classrooms by working strategically, one-to-one, with young writers.

We share these books because we feel they provide examples of how educators might use professional texts of all kinds to guide their teaching of writers across linguistic groups by extrapolating insights from a variety of sources. We offer this collection to support educators in affording students greater opportunities to develop positive writerly identities, passions, and skills, and the writerly confidence to use languages in ways that enrich their abilities and our experiences as audiences for their writing.
Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate against the Odds

The book is organized into four parts: Embracing Biliteracy with Conviction and Purpose; Novelas, Revistas, Fotonovelas, and Prayer Books: Stepping Stones to Biliteracy; Resistance, Agency, and Biliteracy; and Island and Mainland Influences on Biliteracy. Each chapter is an autobiographical account revealing “rich details (rarely shared by academics or in academic books) about the personal and sociocultural contexts in which their biliteracy developed” (p. 11). In Part One, Sonia Nieto, Josué M. González, and Carmen I. Mercado share memories of growing up in homes where Spanish was valued and the goal was biliteracy. They learned early on that being biliterate was something to be proud of, and they worked hard to achieve it.

In Part Two, Lilia I. Bartolomé, Maria de la Luz Reyes, and María V. Balderrama discuss their paths to biliteracy, sharing stories of learning how to read Spanish with easily accessible and everyday materials—novelas, women’s magazines, and hymnals and prayer books from church. They also discuss the connection between language and identity and how learning to read through these materials helped them identify as biliterate.

John J. Halcón, Steven F. Arvizu, and Concepción M. Valadez discuss their role as language brokers for family and community members in Part Three. These experiences taught them about the power associated with being biliterate and also how to fight “against the injustices of English hegemony” (p. 10). Then, in Part Four, María Fránquiz and Pedro Pedraza discuss the impact of spending time in Puerto Rico while growing up and how it contributed positively to their cultural identity and their desire to further their knowledge of Spanish.

In the final chapter, de la Luz Reyes draws comparisons between middle class preschool literacy practices and the social practices of Latino families. She suggests that although the similarities “may not be readily apparent to literacy educators, there is a remarkable likeness between the two.”
(p. 154). She also provides a chart outlining these similarities, giving teachers a concise comparison depicting the strengths of the Latino children’s ways of knowing.

While reading the book, I (Julia) had many flashbacks to my own childhood. Similar to many of the authors, I, too, was a victim of attempts to strip me of my language and culture. Fortunately, I grew up in a home (again, similar to the authors) where my parents were adamant about keeping our language and culture and where becoming an American meant adding to our cultural background, not replacing it. Sadly, as suggested in the foreword to the book, I believe that many children in our schools today will be able to identify with some of the stories shared in this volume. Thus, it is a critically important read for teachers everywhere who seek to understand the experiences of their students. The authors’ willingness to share these private and sometimes painful moments provides a vivid backdrop for emotional stories. Through this book, educators at all levels may develop a heightened awareness of the wealth of resources available to Latino and other students through their families and communities so that they can embrace and invite those resources into their classrooms. The book is a potent example of the power of family, story, and language. (JLR)

Danling Fu’s remarkable volume reflects ten years of collaboration with teachers of English language learners. Students’ writing fills the pages along with the words of teachers who share their insights, challenges, fears, and successes as they learn to embrace multiple languages in student writing. Fu’s work is vividly represented as she demonstrates clearly and carefully how teachers can systematically incorporate home languages, in addition to English, into their classrooms by focusing on students as writers. Example after example illuminates the power of students’ writing when they are supported in using their first languages—the languages that allow them to be the most expressive—while developing expertise in English.

The book builds from an early chapter that outlines writing development in the lives of English language learners, including teaching techniques and strategies, through chapters filled with real-life examples of teachers using students’ home languages to provide opportunities for them to express ideas, emotions, thoughts, and information. One important chapter uses student work to demonstrate the transition to biliteracy. The book also explores students’ writing across content areas; writing assessment; using assessment to plan instruction; teaching reading through writing; teaching vocabulary, spelling, and grammar skills; and collaboration models in which ESL and classroom teachers work together in support of all students as writers.

Early in the book, Fu describes how findings from her ten-year study helped her identify a trajectory that many language learners experience and the power of their growth when they are allowed to write in their home languages. When given this kind of freedom, many students move from writing solely in their home languages, to mixing languages within the same text, to developing a sort of “inter-language” (using one language but with some grammatical features of the other), and finally to conventional English.

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The important point Fu makes is that through this progression, students are able to maintain abilities in their first languages while also becoming proficient writers in English. The impact on students is multifaceted. An adult scholar quoted in the book describes the benefits of being able to write in the language of his home and family:

When I could write first in Chinese, my writing flows. I can explain complicated concepts and ideas with precise language and depth of thinking. The writing is fluent and logical with solid substance. (p. 25)

Fu writes that it is the same for students; they are not held back as writers when they can use the resources of their first languages: “Once our students feel free to choose among language forms to express themselves, they are becoming true writers rather than merely practicing writing for school work” (p.75). Fu then addresses a question that many teachers will ask as they appreciate these ideas theoretically, but worry because they cannot speak the languages of their students’ communities. She provides concrete examples of teachers succeeding in just such instances and explains:

Most ESL and regular classroom teachers in the schools where I have worked were unable to read or write in their ELLs’ native languages . . . . Once the teachers understood that letting the ELLs write in their first language is a way to help them grow as writers, they didn’t feel odd about not being able to read the students’ writing. (p. 30)

The book closes with a statement that is foundational to the message of the entire book. Fu writes, “As a nation of immigrants, we should view new immigrants as an asset rather than as a liability. Our ELLs are at the forefront of global competency. We should value what they bring with them . . . as resources (human capital) rather than as barriers to learning” (p. 122). Writing between Languages communicates just that. It is essential reading for teachers and policy makers everywhere as we consider how best to support students as writers while embracing the richly diverse linguistic environments that are our classrooms and our society. (SL)
conferences that nudge writers forward look, sound, and feel like. Through authentic videos from working classrooms, they show the theoretical complexity of teaching individual writers, thus making their beliefs and practices both accessible and desirable. Matt’s clips were selected from demonstration lessons he conducted while working across the country and in one international school. Katie’s clips were gleaned from conferences she held with young writers in Lisa Cleveland’s classroom in western North Carolina. Because of the diverse contexts from which the videos and samples of children’s work were collected, teachers will appreciate the power and potential of the strategies and language they use with all children.

The electronic format and predictable text structure across conferences makes the book especially flexible, allowing teachers to navigate it in ways that best fit their professional needs and interests. Katie and Matt devised a text structure that seamlessly weaves the videos and written text together into a clear pattern that reflects the fabric of life in classrooms where teachers make instructional decisions by carefully analyzing what children already know and are ready to learn. They ground their work in Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), that space in which children can grow into new understandings and actions with a bit of support. While the authors explicitly state their belief in nudging rather than pushing young authors, they embrace this notion for teachers as well by adopting a predictable text structure that provides coherence with flexibility. Each conference has the following components:

- Introduction to the video conference
- Video Clip Part One: Showing Katie or Matt looking closely and listening carefully
- Note: Matt or Katie naturally assessing the writer and collecting data
- Video Clip Part Two: Featuring Matt or Katie deliberately teaching the writer
- Notes: Teaching the writer, where Katie and Matt unpack the thinking that underpins their teaching moves
- Rationale for the Teaching Decision
- Other Possible Teaching Directions: Other nudges that would make sense for the child, showing responsive teaching as a web of possibilities rather than a linear assessment to instruction model

The narrative interpretation of each conference helps teacher readers appreciate the thoughtfulness of their teaching moves. The conferences reflect a predictable rhythm of research, decide, and teach. They begin with research—what many of us call kidwatching (Goodman, 1978; Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004; Owocki & Goodman, 2002). Before deciding what to teach, both Matt and Katie focus on what the child knows and understands as a writer so they might build on his or her strengths. Next, they determine what to teach by quickly reflecting on a variety of possible teaching decisions. Then they select one or two teaching points that make the most sense at that particular point in time. Once a decision has been made from careful observations and probing conversations, they begin teaching. When watching the videos, you witness firsthand the impact of wise teaching decisions. The young writers grow and change before your eyes, and you feel like you are inside the classroom learning alongside Katie, Matt, and their protégés.

This book portrays the essence of teaching with integrity. Every page and every conference is overflowing with insights and strategies our professional community has come to value in responsive, rigorous teaching. This stance illuminates why teachers must be the primary decision makers in the classroom. Conference after conference shows why it is truly impossible for a program, practice, or prepackaged curriculum to be responsive to individual experiences, strengths, or needs, and readers are continually reminded how wise assessment decisions lead to informed, effective instructional decisions.

Katie and Matt approach each conference with a sense of wonder and anticipation. They wonder who the child is and what the child is doing as an individual writer. They marvel at his or her potential. They reflect on instructional decisions
they might make, and then they intentionally yet gently nudge the young author forward. This marvelous ebook has the potential to intentionally yet gently nudge individual teachers and our profession forward as well. (HM)

References

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2013 Call for Promising Researcher Award

Established in 1970 and given by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research, the Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after the dissertations between December 1, 2010, and January 31, 2013. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts, e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc., and should have employed a recognized research approach, e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc. In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

**Summary of Dates and Deadlines:**

- December 1, 2010–January 31, 2013: Completion dates for research entered
- March 1: Deadline for receipt of manuscripts
- May 15: Results of final judging will be available

For additional submission guidelines, go to [http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/pra](http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/pra). **Manuscripts should be sent to:** Felisa Mann (fmann@ncte.org); subject line should read: *Promising Researcher Award 2013. Manuscripts must be received on or before March 1, 2013.*