

The science of reading for bilingual children

What about children who need literacy in more than one language?



GABRIELA ITURRALDE ESPEJO

In the fall 2022 issue of *Montessori-Public*, NCMPS Executive Director Sara Suchman introduced the topic of reading by highlighting the primacy of communication as an “essential human tendency.” She recognized that communication is culturally determined and experience dependent. She hoped that the publication would open the conversation and offer mirrors and windows to those of us working in Montessori schools.

It definitely did! I could see my school, myself, the guides, administrators, and even the children reflected in our efforts to navigate between being in compliance with the state requirements and being faithful to our Dual Language Montessori program. I appreciate Linda Zankowsky offering a window through which to examine ideas to teach with the Science of Reading (SOR), while I also recognize, as Kacee Weaver says, that the SOR isn’t enough. In this article, I wish to continue the dialogue and to build on what Corey Borgman and Angeline Lillard shared about how children learn to read, with a focus on emergent bilingual children. We must center the linguistic and cultural needs of our bilingual children in all of our schools!

I am the Bilingual Coach at Montessori del Mundo, a Dual Language



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charter school in Aurora, Colorado serving a very diverse community in terms of race, language, culture, and SES. Our Dual Language program instruction in Children’s House is 90% Spanish-10% English, moving to 50-50 in Elementary. Our planned Adolescent program will be among the first Dual Language public Montessori adolescent programs in the nation. We are proud and grateful to be a public charter school because it gives us the opportunity to offer a unique program that responds to the needs of our community which otherwise would not be able to afford it. We face the same challenges as other public Montessori schools in states where policies mandate the implementation of the SOR: adopting a state approved core curriculum, approved reading assessment, and teacher training on the SOR. And, we

do it all in two languages while honoring our Montessori foundation.

Implementation of a core reading program

The state list of approved programs does not (yet!) include the Montessori curriculum and available bilingual options are limited, further reducing the possibility of finding a program that is easily aligned to the Montessori curriculum.

In addition, the “bilingual” programs are not biliteracy curricula; they are two monolingual programs paired while offering minimum guidance on how to implement them together. They tend to be duplicative and if implemented with fidelity require twice the time to cover all the content in both

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languages.

Implementing a traditional program in a Montessori environment is challenging in multiple ways. First, most curricula are designed for one grade, rather than for a multigrade classroom. Second, they have highly scripted curriculum-centered approaches which are contrary to Montessori's child-centered approach. They assume that the curriculum knows more than the guide does about the children in the class. Third, the majority of the instruction is in whole group with limited differentiation. One of Montessori's strengths is having small group highly individualized lessons. Fourth, the lessons are fragmented by skill (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as opposed to Montessori's comprehensive approach with real life connections. Finally, as dual language educators, we face the challenge of implementing a program designed for monolingual students with emergent bilingual learners.

Current approved programs over-emphasize the word/letter recognition (phonics) part of the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope, leaving little room for language development and comprehension. This, despite the fact that we know that meaning-making is most essential for emergent bilinguals. These programs ignore the research on the bilingual brain, biliteracy development, and other linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and academic variables that make learning to read in a second language more complex. It is up to us, therefore, to forefront comprehension and meaning. We need to use the children's background knowledge and cultural experiences as foundations for meaning-making when teaching reading foundational skills in an unfamiliar language.

Implementation of approved assessments

I am not against progress monitoring students' learning with research-based assessments or using data to guide instruction; it is not different from Montessori's scientific observation. What I criticize is the lack of comprehensive assessments in both languages and the quality of the Spanish assessments available, which oftentimes are translations from English that do not correspond to the Spanish language culture, structure, and pedagogy.

The approved tests are designed to measure monolingual students' reading growth and achievement. However, research shows that biliteracy development is different. A biliteracy trajectory takes time. We have conclusive evidence, however, that in the long term biliterate children who are educated in dual language models exceed the academic expectations set for their monolingual peers.

Current assessments, designed and normed on monolingual English speaking students, often indicate that bilingually educated students are behind, when in fact they are experiencing a normal biliterate trajectory. Besides, even when the tests provide useful information to guide instruction, testing is time consuming. The time used for testing could be better used to give lessons and monitor the children's progress following a holistic evaluation strategy with the scientific observation at the core.

The science of reading training requirement

The Colorado READ Act, like legislation in many other states, requires teachers to be trained in the SOR. At our school, we adopted the LETRS training (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling). We recognized that it was not simply a program. Rather, it consists of a professional training that provides teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach reading successfully using



¡Me siento orgullosa de mi trabajo!

any curriculum, including Montessori. Despite some initial resistance from the Montessori guides, we have found LETRS content to be valuable and a good complement to the Montessori training. Nevertheless, it is designed with the needs of the traditional English only classrooms in mind. There is a need to bridge the SOR and Montessori, and in our case, the SOR and biliteracy pedagogies.

Lessons learned, success and next steps

We have been learning as we go, with some successes and some areas for growth. We have been faithful to our program by protecting an uninterrupted three-hour Montessori work cycle in the morning. In the afternoon, we have allocated time for a (bi)literacy block while we work on the alignment between the approved program in both languages, the Montessori curriculum and the state standards (based on the NCMPs Montessori Curriculum to Standards Alignment). We recognize this is not ideal, but we are hopeful that the alignment, in addition to all staff being trained in LETRS by our own LETRS-certified facilitators who support the integration of the SOR with Montessori and biliteracy pedagogies,

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will help us have, in the long term, better prepared adults to teach our children.

Another success has been complementing the assessment data with the Montessori scientific observation and using it to follow the child. We intentionally look at both languages' development to ensure the children are following their bilingual trajectory. In upper elementary, most of our children are reading at or above grade level (Dibels) and as would be predicted by a biliteracy trajectory. We are working to find better authentic assessments to measure Spanish literacy growth.

Strategies for emergent bilingual children

I recognize that not all Montessori schools are bilingual, but all of them have emergent bilingual children. Montessori guides can help emergent bilingual children of any language by using some second language acquisition strategies even if they do not speak

the other language themselves.

The National Committee for Effective Literacy released a research and policy overview in 2022 (*Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students*, available at multilingualliteracy.org/resources/) which includes some useful strategies.

First, use a comprehensive approach prioritizing communication and meaning making, integrating all reading skills and subject areas in a meaningful context, while accepting that the pacing may be different.

Second, leverage home language skills that transfer by identifying the similarities between languages and explicitly teaching the differences, using cognates, prefixes, suffixes, etc., and welcoming children's diverse background knowledge.

Third, promote oral language development by providing multiple opportunities to use oral language and acquire vocabulary. One key element of literacy development is language comprehension. One cannot comprehend or express in writing what cannot be comprehended or expressed orally.

Fourth, value diversity and make cross-language and cross-cultural connections through an inclusive curriculum and socio-cultural responsive practices. Link foundational skills to ideas, concepts, and materials that are culturally familiar.

The education of the whole child requires us to think carefully about curricula, testing, and the SOR while remaining true to Montessori. The SOR can provide knowledge and insights with the potential to enhance the Montessori curriculum. However, the SOR does not provide all the answers especially for implementation following the Montessori principles of individualization, independence, free choice, holistic education, multigrade classrooms, and authentic and context based approach.

In the case of biliteracy development, it is important to be aware that the "science" used to support these efforts was primarily conducted with monolingual speakers of English. Even though the research available so far about biliteracy is strong, we do not yet have a sufficiently robust "Science of Biliteracy" related to the acquisition of foundational skills. We do know, however, that bilingual learners bring many assets to our environments and when provided with educational opportunities that capitalize on the languages and cultures that they contribute, they thrive. It may be hard to put all these pieces together and it may take a village, but it is feasible and worth it. I hope we continue finding mirrors, windows, and an open conversation for the good of our programs and children.

Gabriela Iturralde Espejo serves as Bi-Literacy Coordinator at Montessori del Mundo, a public charter in Aurora, Colorado, and a PhD student in the Equity, Bilingualism and Biliteracy program at the University of Colorado Boulder.

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