From Outreach to Translanguaging
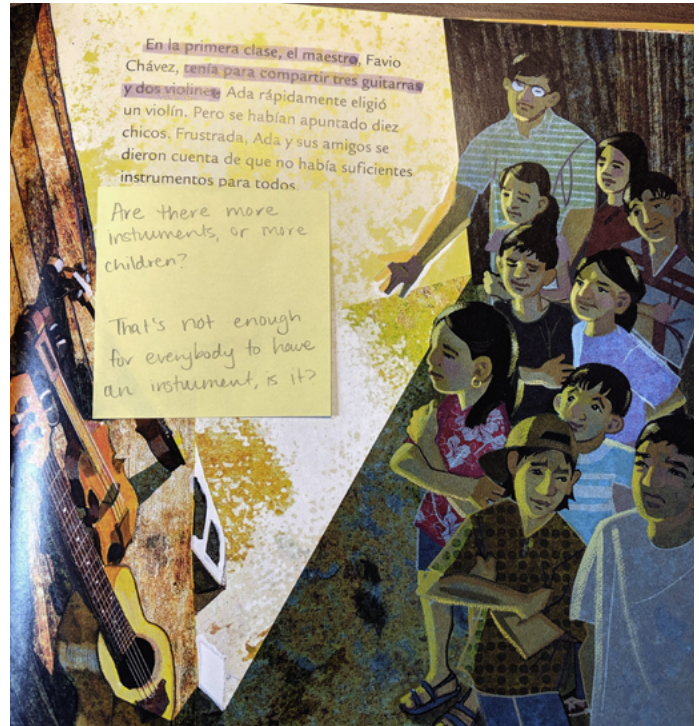
Developing a Bilingual Storytime

LAURA KELLY AND CINTHYA BOLANOS

Translanguaging with *El Violín de Ada*

Acollege student shows the illustrations of the bilingual book *What Can You Do with a Rebozo?* She turns to several pages that she has marked, shows the pictures to children gathered for bilingual storytime, and talks about each picture in English. The student stops on the page that describes a *baile,* or dance, that the child in the book does with her mamá's *rebozo*, or brightly colored shawl. The student reads this page in Spanish and asks the children if they would like to dance with their own rebozos. The children excitedly say they would, and the student passes out play scarves. The children jump, clap, stomp, and sing along with their rebozos while dancing to an English song.

A family recently arrived from Colombia and still learning English joins the fun. So does a family from Mexico, whose children use more English than Spanish; this family wants to support their children's connection to their heritage language of Spanish. Some English-speaking families have enrolled their children in dual-language schools or after-school Spanish clubs. They bring their children to bilingual storytime for even more exposure to Spanish. Other families with internationally adopted children or who are serving as sponsors or foster families for unaccompanied Central American minors bring their children to celebrate their cultural and linguistic background.

Scenes like this one unfold monthly at our library. In this article, we present our bilingual storytime program as a case study and share research findings about developing strong programming and outreach to sustain such a program.

Why Does Bilingual Storytime Matter?

We, a college-based researcher and student team, started bilingual storytime in collaboration with the Memphis (TN) Public Library system. We initially envisioned it as supporting immigrant families to keep Spanish alive in their homes. By the second or third generation, many immigrant families lose their home language.[1] In focus groups we held with parents before designing our program, local families reported speaking to their children in Spanish with children responding in English.

These families had begun to experience the home language loss that many immigrant communities experience, and they

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expressed that maintaining Spanish in their homes mattered to them.[2] These families described wanting their children to remain connected to their roots, communicate with family, travel in their home countries, and have strong job prospects due to their bilingualism. They explained, "Es nuestra tradición hablar español" (Speaking Spanish is our tradition) and that children should learn Spanish "para que no se olvide la raíz" (so they do not forget their roots).

When English surrounds children in school, stores, and services (like the doctor's office or the library), some children start to see English as a more legitimate and prestigious language, and they may resist their parents' efforts to keep Spanish alive.[3] Other children may shift to English because it becomes their stronger language, and they do not feel confident communicating in their home language as they grow older.[4]

Thus, community organizations can play a critical role in promoting children's home languages.[5] Programs like bilingual storytime serve as important "sites of validation" to support children's positive views of Spanish.[6] Such programs do not just "tolerate, but value, support, and sustain the diverse linguistic and cultural practices of communities of color" and "reshape discriminatory public discourses about racially and linguistically marginalized communities."[7] That message matters for children who grow up speaking Spanish and those who only speak English.

It is not reasonable to argue that children will improve their Spanish because they come to one thirty-minute storytime per month. However, hosting a regular bilingual event at the public library (a government building) communicates the legitimacy of Spanish. Children who attend see people from a variety of racial backgrounds proudly using Spanish. They learn that Spanish has a rich oral and literary tradition and that published authors write in Spanish. They build relationships with other attendees who speak or want to learn Spanish, and they can check out materials to take home and read with their family. Regular use of such materials may support their ongoing biliteracy development.[8]

Once we started bilingual storytime, we learned that families had many reasons for attending. Some felt strong in Spanish and wanted to learn English. Other families did not speak Spanish, but their children wanted to learn. Bilingual storytime ended up bringing diverse families together for multilingual early childhood fun.

Literature Review

Services for Spanish-Speaking People in Public Libraries

More than 40 million people speak Spanish in the United States.[9] Libraries that develop programming and special collections for multilingual people most commonly target Spanish speakers. Some of the most successful programs librarians report include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, second-language materials, computer programs, and storytime programs.[10]

In a nationwide survey about public libraries, Latinx people reported appreciating book lending, the quiet safe space of the library, and services beyond book lending.[11] This survey found that 72 percent of Latinx respondents had visited a public library and 62 percent knew about services their library offered. Latinx respondents who were first-generation immigrants were less likely than US-born Latinx families to have a library card, have used the library website, have taken their child to a storytime, and consider it "very easy" to visit the public library. Of course, "Latinx" does not automatically equate to "Spanish speaker," but there is some overlap between these groups, and these survey results are nevertheless informative for libraries that want to welcome Spanish-speaking communities.

Many libraries have tried to become more inclusive of Spanish-speaking patrons.[12] To do so successfully, libraries should hire bilingual staff and collaborate with their communities to develop collections that those communities find culturally and linguistically relevant.[13] Creating a welcoming environment for Spanish-speaking people also involves providing information in Spanish such as the library website, the catalog interface, library card applications, signs in the library, and instructions on public computers.[14]

In addition to creating a welcoming space and relevant programming, libraries need to do outreach in Spanish-speaking communities if they want those communities to use the library. Some immigrants may have fears about disclosing their citizenship status, such as needing to show identification to get a library card.[15] Of course, not all Spanish speakers are immigrants or immigrants with tenuous legal status, but libraries will need to acknowledge these possible issues.

People may also not be familiar with the range of useful services the library offers to them. Providing information can help assuage these concerns. Libraries should collaborate with communities to understand their needs; it may not be helpful to just promote programs the library already has.[16] After developing programs in response to community needs, the library can promote those programs in Spanish-language print and social media,[17] and it can partner with people in the Spanish-speaking community to promote library programs and services.[18]

Second-Language Storytimes

Latinx people report in surveys that they value library services for their children; they are more likely than other demographic groups to say that closing their local library would have a negative impact on their families.[19] Libraries often find storytimes a comfortable way to begin outreach to Spanish-speaking populations.[20] Furthermore, "storytimes in other languages can be a point of entry to the library for many

adults."[21] If families bring their children to storytime, they may also learn about other library programs and services.

Little research has described effective bilingual storytime programming. Some librarians have reported their outreach at local schools to recruit children to come to bilingual storytime.[22] Others have described working with community members to facilitate and promote bilingual storytimes,[23] while others have given suggestions for building a bilingual storytime program.[24] With this article, we hope to add to the small, but growing, research base about developing effective bilingual storytime programming and outreach.

Our Research

As of this writing, we have conducted monthly bilingual storytimes across two school years. Our team includes seven people—a bilingual educational studies professor at a local college and six students from the college. Two students grew up in Spanish-speaking families in Memphis; these students took a more active role in designing storytime and informing its outreach strategy. A third student grew up speaking Spanish and English in Chicago. The other three members grew up speaking English and learned Spanish to intermediate or advanced levels through study in school. The students' majors include educational studies, psychology, urban studies, Spanish, and Latin American and Latinx studies.

Local Context

Over the past thirty years, Memphis has become part of the Latin American diaspora and is home to more than 45,000 people described by the US Census as Hispanic or Latino.[25] Spanish speakers in Memphis have developed vibrant businesses, numerous activist groups and nonprofits, multiple newspapers and radio stations, schools, sports leagues, and religious organizations. Shelby County Schools, the major public school district serving Memphis, reports having more than 24,000 students who speak languages in addition to English; of those who receive ESL instruction, 91 percent speak Spanish.[26] Most Spanish speakers in the school district grew up in the United States, and their parents are Mexican. Among recent arrivals, most Spanish speakers come from Guatemala and Honduras.

Methods

Our research took a formative and design-based approach, which began with identifying a goal, implementing a program (based on theory and prior research) to meet that goal, collecting data about the program's success, and modifying the program based on the data.[27] Based on research about the value and importance of children maintaining their home languages, our goal was to develop a well-attended early childhood bilingual storytime that Spanish-speaking families find supports their goals to maintain Spanish in their homes. Our primary research question, consistent with formative and design-based research, was, "How can the intervention (bilingual storytime) be modified to achieve the goal more effectively and efficiently and in a way that is appealing and engaging to all stakeholders?"[28]

We collected the following data to guide our efforts to modify the program. Prior to designing the program, we held two focus groups with Spanish-speaking parents to learn about their goals for their children's Spanish, their current use of the library, and their suggestions for developing and spreading the word about bilingual storytime. Once we began the program, we documented how many families attended, how many books on display in the storytime room were checked out, and how many people signed up for a library card. We wrote collaborative reflections after each storytime that documented what went well at storytime and ways we could improve. These reflections include our observations about children's behavior and families' participation and engagement with library resources and personnel.[29]

At each storytime, we collected exit surveys from parents. We also maintain a Facebook page for storytime, and we have data on how many people responded to (and then actually attended) storytime events, who "shares" our events on their pages, and how many people our posts reach through social media.

We analyzed this data qualitatively to identify key themes and lessons learned in establishing our storytime program.[30] In this article, we share our findings related to modifying our program (what we actually do during storytime) and modifying our outreach, both with the goal of building a well-attended bilingual storytime that supports Spanish language use.

What Does Bilingual Storytime Look Like?

Our bilingual storytime occurs once a month on a Saturday morning. We selected this time based on feedback in our focus groups; we wanted to accommodate working families. The all-ages program lasts thirty minutes with an additional fifteen minutes for a craft. Funding for books and craft supplies comes from small grants and the library children's programming and collection development budgets. So far, each bilingual storytime has drawn forty to sixty people.

An average storytime might include two picturebooks, three songs with movements or dance, a game, and several poems or fingerplays. For example, the most recent storytime had the theme of clothing/*ropa*. The activities included a "Buenos Días" song (an echo song), a movement activity while repeating vocabulary in both languages from a large poster, a Spanish song about clothing, a Spanish picturebook about dresses that we introduced and reviewed in English with props, the rebozo book and dance described in the introduction to this

article, a bilingual read-aloud of a picturebook about *chanclas* (flip-flops), two more songs in Spanish that we explained and taught in English, bilingual announcements, and then the Spanish "Adiós Amigos" song (another echo song). Because the activities are bilingual, children of different language backgrounds participate even in activities that use a language they are still learning.

How Can We Develop Strong Bilingual Storytime Programming?

Of course, what makes *any* storytime successful also makes bilingual storytime successful. We select engaging books and songs. We encourage participation from families. We keep our energy high and our pace quick to accommodate children's short attention spans; we do something new every two or three minutes. However, we have learned two lessons specifically about making bilingual storytime successful.

Lesson #1: Do Less

First, we learned to do fewer activities and spend more time on them so that everyone could understand. Slowing down mattered because many of our participants understood one language much better than the other, but we wanted everyone actively engaged both when we used Spanish and when we used English. When we first started, we tried to do lots of books, songs, and activities. Each activity was thematically related to the overall storytime theme, but we were doing something different, and in a different language, every few minutes. On exit surveys, parents commented, "The pace felt a little fast." They encouraged us to slow down so we could fit in "more repetition of songs . . . sing them enough that everyone can catch on (and slowly enough)." Exit surveys also suggested repeating key phrases two or three times before beginning a new song or activity.

We started writing the lyrics to songs on large posters, doing activities and movement to teach children the vocabulary, and then singing the songs. We recorded in our research journal how this strategy increased participation. During one program, we sang "Debajo del Botón," a traditional rhyme about Martín, who finds a mouse hiding under a button. We showed pictures to explain the song in English, had children repeat key words, and then we sang the song. The recording we sang along with plays the song five times: the first time with singing, the next time with removing a syllable and clapping in its place, then removing two syllabus and clapping (like the English song "B-I-N-G-O"), then whispering the song, and then singing it loudly. This activity with pictures, repeating, and multiple renditions of the song took longer, but each element felt different enough to keep children's attention, and since they sang the song so many times, everyone was singing by the end.

We also read fewer books, finding that was better because we could explain the book, do movement and response activities that go with it, and talk about the same text in both languages. For example, after one storytime in which we tried to read parts of five books, we realized it would be better to select a bilingual book and read it in both languages than to read one book in English and then a different book in Spanish. We tried that strategy later by reading the Spanish version, doing an activity, then returning and reading the English version. We found that using the same text twice helped everyone understand and kept children's attention.

These findings make sense in the context of what we know about early language learning. Children need more time to process new language,[31] and multiple repetitions build their fluency.[32] Providing opportunities to practice the same language through different means (activity, song, discussion) makes the language more comprehensible and easier to learn.[33]

Lesson #2: Translanguaging

When we began bilingual storytime, we alternated English activities with Spanish activities. However, we quickly realized that this artificial separation between languages is not how bilingual communities actually talk; they regularly use both languages within the same activity.[34] Furthermore, reading an entire book or doing a whole song in only one language made it hard for people still learning that language to follow along. On exit surveys, families requested that we repeat activities we did in Spanish and do them or explain them in English as well. While we kept the name "bilingual storytime," we decided to shift to a "translanguaging storytime" approach.

In educational activities, translanguaging means welcoming children's participation in whatever language they feel most comfortable, and it means strategically using both languages within the same activity to help everyone understand.[35] Taking this new approach allowed us to tell stories bilingually, which made all our stories always understandable to everyone in the room. Our translanguaging approach connected well with what we learned about doing less. We could spend longer on one activity because we did part of it in Spanish, part in English, and then reviewed again in Spanish. Translanguaging facilitated language learning because instead of hearing a solid two minutes in a new language, children heard little bits at a time, alongside illustrations and the language that they understood best. When we did an entire song or book in only one language, we translanguaged by previewing the book or teaching the song in the other language.

For example, while reading a Spanish book about colors (*Mis Colores, Mi Mundo*), facilitators engaged the children by asking questions and making comments about the text in English, as well as encouraging the attendees to recreate the motions. By going back and explaining what had just happened in English,

without repeating the same material, all participants understood what was going on without being bored. This approach proved more inclusive for all in the room.

We also developed a translanguaging read-aloud routine. This routine allowed us to read longer and more complex books in Spanish, but with English support. For example, we read *El Violín de Ada*, a book entirely in Spanish that is too long for an early childhood storytime, and another month we read *Little Chanclas*, a bilingual book that has Spanish paragraphs on every page and is also too long for storytime. Following our translanguaging read-aloud routine, we underlined in advance key sentences (one or two per page) that we read in Spanish. We added sticky notes throughout the book to remind us of what we wanted to say in English to clarify or expand the Spanish and to point children's attention to specific aspects of the pictures. This process turned what would be a ten-minute read in complex Spanish into a three-minute bilingual interactive read-aloud.

On exit surveys, families have responded to this approach positively: "I love how you blend, or explain, in English and Spanish!" They stated that they liked the "mix of Spanish and English" and "seeing very young language learners comprehend in both languages." Parents found "shifting from English to Spanish . . . is very helpful" for children to notice similarities and differences between languages.

Adopting this approach had many positive effects in keeping with other research on translanguaging. Children's participation and attention increased even when we used a language that they were still learning, and parents of all language backgrounds felt included.[36] Children could rely on their background knowledge of one language to support their learning in the other language.[37] Children had opportunities to develop metalinguistic awareness, or more developed understanding of how languages work and how they are alike and different.[38] Translanguaging allowed us to model the actual practices of bilingual communities.[39] It allowed all members of our team, even those with intermediate proficiency in Spanish, to participate in leading any part of storytime.

Outreach

Throughout this experience, one of the most important lessons we learned was meeting people where they are. When we started this project, we placed flyers in places such as restaurants and laundromats in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods; however, when we spoke to families at storytime, they reported that they learned about storytime through Facebook, a flyer received through their child's school, or the library's advertising.

Ultimately, we found that Facebook was the most effective means of communicating with people and gauging how big of a turn out we have each month. This finding confirmed what parents told us in focus groups, that they learned about community events through Facebook. We created Facebook "events" for each storytime and shared them via Messenger with more than twenty Spanish-language organizations (such as nonprofits, schools, and news organizations); up to ten organizations reposted or shared these events each month. We also purchased Facebook ads to promote the events.

In addition to creating social media events, we maintain a regular Facebook page, @MemphisBilingualStorytime. We translate our enthusiasm to the digital-scape by posting positive bilingual content one to three times a week. We post content that either informs parents about library services, or casts bilingualism in a positive light, as well as promotional content for storytime, such as pictures of books we plan on reading, or pictures of posters we plan on utilizing. We take a strengths-based approach to bilingualism in our programming, and try to convey this in our Facebook content as well. Facebook helps us to maintain contact with our audience throughout the month, which allows us to continue building relationships, even when we are not physically in the same space. These combined strategies of sharing our events with other organizations, purchasing ads, and posting regular content lead to 80–120 responses per month to our Facebook event; 10 to 20 percent of those respondents attend the event. (Other people attended who did not respond on Facebook.)

We have worked hard to establish relationships with schools to promote storytime. We targeted schools that had a high percentage of Spanish-speaking students or bilingual classes. We ensured that our flyers had dates for the entire school year, and we have shared them with local elementary and Head Start classes. We have found ESL and bilingual teachers especially responsive to our outreach efforts. They have invited us to attend parent nights to share storytime information, and some of our most faithful attendees come from these schools. We meet teachers where they are by taking their limited printing budgets into account. We bring printed flyers to schools to make promoting storytime easy for teachers.

Setting up at community events has been a great way of establishing relationships with the Spanish-speaking community and other organizations who serve them. For example, the City of Memphis invited us to Latinx Night hosted by the department of parks and recreation, and a bilingual theater group invited us to table at Latin Fest, a festival held during Hispanic Heritage Month. In addition to handing out information, we do pop-up storytimes and book giveaways at events. Community events help us get to know the population we serve better as well as increase our visibility in the community.

Conclusion

Bilingual storytime has helped our library communicate that it is serious about welcoming all members of our community. Since this program has been successful, the library staff is considering how to implement regular bilingual storytimes (not dependent on us or other outside volunteers) as part of its early childhood literacy programs. This step matters for the sustainability of such programs. Bilingual storytime has brought together diverse families, promoted Spanish and English literacy, and been fun for all of us! It takes effort to build relationships in a community and learn what that community wants, but the resulting program has rewarded everyone involved. &

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Launching a Bilingual Storytime

1. **Identify a team.** If no one on your library staff is bilingual, consider partnering with a university, community organization, or public school. High school or college students who speak or study the second language could make great partners. If your library serves a large bilingual community, and no one on staff is bilingual, it may be time to ask why. Library staff should represent the communities they serve.

2. **Assess the community's wants**. Hold focus groups to find out when and where to hold storytimes, what impediments might prevent people from coming, what library services the target community is aware of or using, and how the target community thinks about early education and reading.

3. **Build a robust bilingual or second-language collection.** You can do this as you go. If you are trying to build your Spanish-language collection, consider reviewing awards lists like the Pura Belpré Award, Tomás Rivera Award, and Américas Award. Review catalogs from multicultural and multilingual publishers such as Lee & Low, Cinco Puntos Press, Arte Público, Lectorum, and Lectura Books.

4. **Implement an outreach plan.** Connect with other organizations serving the community you hope to attract to storytime. Send home flyers through local schools. Promote your event on social media.

5. **Start holding storytimes and collect feedback.** Start with one event and see how it goes. Short (bilingual!) surveys that ask families how they learned about the program, what they liked, and what suggestions they have will help you refine your program over time.

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