DLL: Effective Early Literacy Intervention in Spanish for Students in Bilingual Education Programs

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Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) is an early literacy intervention designed to support first-grade children struggling to acquire literacy in Spanish. Since the initial development of this reconstruction of Reading Recovery® guided by Marie Clay, it has impacted expanding sets of learners and assisted Spanish-speaking children to reach the average literacy performance levels for their age cohort. The purpose of this discussion is to confirm the ongoing need of this intervention for our school population of non-native speakers of English and to review the procedures, processes, and observed benefits of DLL.

A Growing Population of Spanish Speakers

Spanish is the most commonly spoken language in the United States other than English. A vast number of the 35 million Hispanics ages 5 and older speak Spanish at home. In fact, the number of Spanish speakers in the U.S. has increased more than 230% since 1988 and continues to grow rapidly. Spanish has also become the second language of choice in the U.S., leading the list of all non-English languages spoken by non-Hispanics. In other words, Spanish is the leading, non-English language of the U.S. for Hispanic and non-Hispanics alike (López & González-Barrera, 2013).

Children constitute a large segment of this Spanish-speaking population. In terms of school-age children, the data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau (2009) indicate that over 11 million students in Grades K–12 speak a language other than English at home and of this subgroup, 8 million speak Spanish. Observations of the English language proficiency of school children reflect this increase. About 1 of every 5 children of immigrants who are of school age are learning how to speak English, compared with 1 in every 100 children born in the U.S. of native-born parents (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2005). Spanish is the home language for the majority of English language learners (ELLs) and emergent bilingual students (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). Based on the demographic trends of the last two decades, the number of children enrolled in U.S. schools who are emergent bilingual students with varied levels of language proficiency will likely continue to increase.

The largest group of emergent, bilingual children is in the elementary school in pre-kindergarten to fifth-grade classrooms. In order to accommodate the linguistic diversity of our school population, bilingual education including one-way and two-way dual language programs are continuing to flourish across the country. There are a number of options in terms of instructional services for bilingual students in the current educational landscape, and it is interesting to consider the alternatives for instruction and for early intervention.

Current Landscape of Spanish-English Bilingual Education in the U.S.

The population of students participating in Spanish-English bilingual programs of instruction has increased two-fold in recent years, and the programs of instruction vary depending on the students’ first language. The group of students comprised of native Spanish speakers who are engaged in learning English and are challenged to acquire literacy and academic knowledge in English, are enrolled in bilingual programs that are transitional, maintenance, or dual language programs (described below). These programs are designed to supplement their instruction in English with Spanish instruction to ensure their linguistic, literacy, and academic success. For this group of students, bilingual education is a critical necessity, a must; without access to bilingual education, they would find it very difficult to be successful in school.

A second group of students, whose first language is English, is offered two-way, dual language immersion programs of instruction. The goal for these students is to learn Spanish as a second language and to become fully bilingual while learning academic content knowledge in both languages. Many parents enroll their children in two-way, dual language programs when available as a way to enrich their education and foster bilingualism and biliteracy. For these students, bilingual education could be consi-
gender a plus; they may not need it to be successful in school, but it offers a beneficial, enriching academic experience.

There are many approaches to the education of emergent bilingual students. Some models such as English as a second language (ESL) use only one language, English. This model—as well as some transitional models of bilingual education that promote an early exit to the mainstream (all English) curriculum—are considered subtractive because the students do not continue to develop their native language and may not continue to read and write in their native language beyond the third or fourth grade. Other bilingual education models such as late exit, maintenance, and dual language models use two languages of instruction and accomplish a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate goal (Baker, 2007). These models are considered additive because the students add a second language while strengthening and developing their first language at the highest levels possible. The strongest forms of bilingual education use two languages in an additive form that yields pluralistic results (Yoon, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2015). The characteristics of the most-common programs utilized to serve bilingual students are briefly described in Table 1 that follows.

**DLL Overview**

When planning comprehensive bilingual education programs designed to ensure academic success for divergent groups of students, the important differences in the students’ first language and related instructional needs are taken into consideration. In regard to the acquisition of reading and writing abilities, research confirms that literacy instruction in a learner’s native language is beneficial (Collier & Thomas, 2004). In fact, early literacy instruction in the first or dominant language supports literacy success in the second language (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). Thus, the research evidence supports the efficacy of providing Spanish-speaking children beginning reading instruction in Spanish. Additionally, a comprehensive literacy plan for these learners should include a well-designed early literacy intervention that matches the language of initial literacy instruction. In Spanish, this early intervention is DLL.

The theoretical constructs of the DLL intervention parallel Clay’s (2015, 2016) complex theory of literacy acquisition and reflect her instructional design. Briefly, key principles include:

- a literacy processing theory of reading and writing acquisition in any language,
- a constructivist theory of learning,
- the important role of oral language,
- the power of reading and writing continuous texts,
- the reciprocity of reading and writing,
- the need to accommodate for individual’s diversity and recognize that children take different paths to learning to read and write,
- an emphasis on development of a learner’s independence,
- the use of systematic observation and assessment to guide instruction, and
- the importance of intervening early to prevent ongoing difficulties.

While Reading Recovery and DLL are built upon Clay’s theoretical foundation, there are differences in the DLL assessment procedures that have been designed to accommodate the unique features of the Spanish
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Language of Instruction</th>
<th>Linguistic Goal</th>
<th>Language Group(s)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>Submersion (sink or swim, not bilingual, not ESL)</td>
<td>Monolingual: English</td>
<td>Immediate entry to the mainstream</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>No program</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>Structured Immersion to English (not bilingual)</td>
<td>Monolingual: English</td>
<td>Quick exit to the mainstream</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK-3</td>
<td>English proficiency</td>
<td>English proficiency</td>
<td>Immediate entry to the mainstream</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>Typically 1-3 years</td>
<td>Subtractive Assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK-5</td>
<td>Early exit</td>
<td>English proficiency</td>
<td>Exit to the mainstream</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>Typically 1-3 years</td>
<td>Subtractive Assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>Exit to mainstream</td>
<td>Academic success in English</td>
<td>Gradual but accelerated decrease of Spanish use</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>Typically 1-5 years</td>
<td>Subtractive Assimilation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>Exit to mainstream</td>
<td>Academic success in English</td>
<td>Gradual decrease of Spanish use</td>
<td>1 group: Spanish-dominant students</td>
<td>Typically 1-5 years</td>
<td>Subtractive Assimilation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Table 1. Instructional Programs for Spanish-Speaking Bilingual Students**
language. In fact, the reconstruction of An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013) in the new language of instruction, was the very first step in the process of developing DLL. Rodríguez, Hobsbaum, & Bourque (2003) offer clear descriptions of the process and the important linguistic considerations in reconstructing the Observation Survey in a new language. In order to participate in DLL, students must receive daily reading instruction in Spanish at least through third grade.

DLL students receive an accelerated intervention tailored to meet their individual areas of need by way of their strengths. Teachers provide individual lessons and work intensively for 30 minutes while using continuous text in reading and writing activities. They use observation, assessment, and data analysis to plan daily lessons and teach students how to problem solve in reading and writing. Teachers address word work, phonemic awareness, and the alphabetic principle in every lesson. The interventions last only a short period of 12–20 weeks. As soon as students reach the average performance of their peers, their interventions are discontinued and new students take their places.

**Contributions of DLL**

**To children**

English learners or emergent bilingual students in the U.S. are working very hard each year to reach a moving target. They simply do not have time to waste with interventions that do not work! The DLL intervention works, and numerous evaluation studies have confirmed this (Neal & Kelly, 1999; Lomax, 2017).

The progress of all DLL students is monitored and reported each year by the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC, 2017). (See Lomax, 2017, for the most recent report.) These annual evaluations consistently and clearly show how effective DLL instruction is in closing the gaps in reading achievement that are initially observed in first grade (Lomax). Moreover, students who successfully complete the intervention not only close the gaps shown at the beginning of the school year when compared with a random sample of their peers, but they surpass the performance of the random sample at the end of the intervention (Escamilla, Loera, Ruiz, & Rodríguez, 1998).

**To teachers’ learning**

DLL teachers receive in-depth training through graduate-level university coursework facilitated by a DLL teacher leader employed by their school system. Their preparation includes an initial full year of Reading Recovery training that focuses on Clay’s theoretical perspectives of early literacy and language development, early literacy intervention, and effective instructional practices. During this first year of training, teachers delve into the intricacies of tutoring first-grade Reading Recovery students while working with at least two rounds of 4 students in addition to their other responsibilities in the school. Many Reading Recovery and DLL teachers, for example, also support push-in or pull-out small reading groups of students who need supplemental, early literacy instruction, or serve as classroom teachers or literacy coaches for a portion of the day.

The initial Reading Recovery training may also include working with English learners who are receiving initial literacy instruction in English. This is usually the case as English learners, or emergent bilingual students, constitute a large percentage of the population in these teachers’ school districts.

After their first year of training in Reading Recovery, the teachers receive a full additional year of DLL training. This year is designed to bridge teachers’ understandings of the reconstruction of Reading Recovery in Spanish. The training of DLL teachers and their continued professional development opportunities also take into consideration the educational, sociocultural, and linguistic contexts in which bilingual children learn (Escamilla et al., 1998).

Often, DLL teachers and teacher leaders become the bilingual early literacy experts in their school buildings. They assist their colleagues and provide support to administrators by leading literacy teams in monitoring the progress of all children. They work with their teams to make instructional decisions collaboratively for the benefit of all bilingual students.

**Current Trends and Future Research in DLL**

The initial research supporting DLL was conducted in bilingual education programs for students whose first language was Spanish. These students were enrolled in transitional, late exit, or maintenance bilingual education programs, and they were receiving early literacy instruction in their first language (Escamilla, 1994). There is strong evidence to support the positive outcomes and sustained effects of DLL with this group of students (Escamilla et al., 1998; Lomax, 2017).
Current implementation of DLL has widened to also support students who are not native Spanish speakers. This is due to the rising demand for early literacy intervention for students enrolled in Spanish immersion, two-way dual language programs. While the results for DLL students continue to be monitored, more information is needed about this particular group of DLL students.

**Conclusion**

In this interconnected world, bilingualism, biliteracy, and multiculturalism are important goals for the future of our society. However, designing programs for emergent bilingual students necessitates careful consideration. There are many details to be explored and many challenges to surpass. Initial literacy instruction must be carefully orchestrated and include early literacy intervention that matches the language of instruction in reading. Equity in terms of access to intervention is an important aspect of program design. Careful attention to all these aspects will ensure literacy success for all our bilingual students. DLL professionals contribute substantially to school success for Spanish-speaking children, allowing them to pursue their highest potential. We will continue to advocate for the expansion and availability of Descubriendo la Lectura to increasing numbers of students.

**References**


About the Author

Dr. Annette Torres Elías is an associate professor in the Department of Reading at Texas Woman’s University where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses and is a Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura trainer. Her scholarly work is focused on early literacy, bilingual education, and biliteracy.