naeyc

Promoting Language Learning Through Dual Language and Non-English Books

CHRISTOPHER J. WAGNER JEEIN CHUNG CHELSEA KIM YARITZA PERDOMO

As the children in Jeein Chung's first-grade class sit on the rug waiting for the day's reading lesson to begin, she overhears Tommy ask Leighton, "Can you say something in Chinese?" Leighton responds, "Yeah. Nee-Hao." When Ms. Chung asks Leighton how she knows that word, Leighton responds, "I don't know."

Later, as the class works on a writing and drawing activity to show how each of them is unique, Andrea raises her hand and asks, "Can I write that I speak Spanish?"

"Of course you can," Ms. Chung says. "Can you tell me some words you know?"

"I know how to say cake," Andrea says. Ms. Chung then asks her, "Cómo se dice 'cake' en español?" Andrea smiles and responds, "Pastel." She seems to be in a brighter mood after sharing her knowledge.

Ms. Chung is interested to see how her children are already curious about the idea of multiple languages. These interactions keep bringing her back to the same question: How can she make language use meaningful in her classroom?

This moment from Jeein Chung's classroom illustrates the questions and challenges many teachers of multilingual learners face when designing instruction that incorporates non-English languages. Though these languages may sometimes appear in a variety of early childhood settings, it is not always clear how to use them meaningfully or how to introduce and incorporate them into instruction in intentional ways.

These questions are relevant to early childhood teachers because the language development of all children, including multilingual learners, is influenced by the quantity, diversity, and sophistication of the language children are exposed to in and outside of school (Bowers & Vasilyeva 2011; Castro et al. 2011). The use of multilingual learners' home languages can play a particularly important role in classroom literacy learning, with the use of these languages linked to higher reading performance (Burchinal et al. 2012). They can also be a part of culturally sustaining early childhood settings for multilingual learners (Osorio 2020) and align with equitable practices recommended by NAEYC (2019).

Dual language and non-English books are an underused tool for promoting curiosity and engagement in early language learning and instruction. All children, including those who speak only English, benefit from exposure to dual language and non-English books because these texts support learners' development of language awareness and the metalinguistic skills that encourage flexible and active engagement with language and texts (Barac & Bialystok 2011). However, while research shows the advantages of introducing these books to children, there remains little guidance for teachers on how to use them in the classroom (Sneddon 2008; Naqvi et al. 2012). This article provides five ways both monolingual and multilingual teachers can use dual language and non-English books in pre-K through third-grade classrooms to elicit engagement and generate curiosity about language.

Dual Language and Non-English Books in the Classroom

Expanding the texts used in early childhood classrooms to include multiple languages can create empathy among children and foster their social and emotional learning (NAEYC 2019; Garces-Bacsal 2020). It can also facilitate home and community connections, build a culture of respect and advocacy for multilingualism and multiculturalism, and support educators who are committed to moving toward culturally responsive and sustaining teaching (Curtin & Reynolds 2022). Indeed, moving away from English-only models of language and literacy is an important step toward embracing the values and goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Sharma & Christ 2017).

Dual language books come in varied forms. These range from books that include all of the text in two languages (such as *Todos Iguales: Un Corrido De Lemon Grove/All Equal: A Ballad of Lemon Grove*, by Christy Hale) to books that are primarily in one language but include select words from another language (such as *The Ugly Vegetables*, by Grace Lin). Non-English books are written in only one language, which is not English.

Some early childhood educators may already agree with the aims of using dual language and non-English books and have them in their classrooms. Others may be exploring these books for the first time. Guidance is already available on evaluating the quality of these books (Huang & Chen 2016) and on selecting them with attention to features of design, language, culture, and overall quality (Chen 2019). The more challenging question for teachers—including those who may not share a common language with some or all of their students—is often how to use dual language and non-English books in their teaching and learning environments.

Five Approaches for Using Dual Language and Non-English Books

The approaches shared here offer teachers a range of practices they can adapt depending on their current knowledge, learning goals, and teaching contexts. They were generated by a group of multilingual teachers during an inquiry project facilitated by Christopher J. Wagner, a researcher at Queens College, City University of New York and the first author (see Wagner 2021 for more information). The inquiry group was made up of five teachers

(including this article's second, third, and fourth authors) in pre-K through grade-3 classrooms in the United States. Jeein Chung (second author) taught in a first-grade special education classroom in a public school. Chelsea Kim (third author) taught in a second-grade Korean-English dual language classroom in a public school. Yaritza Perdomo (fourth author) taught in a pre-K classroom in a community-based child care center.

Developing Teaching Practices Through Inquiry

Teacher inquiry is a professional learning model in which educators engage in systematic, intentional, and self-critical inquiry about their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009; Wagner, in press). It can be a powerful tool for centering the voices of diverse teachers, including multilingual educators. The inquiry process draws on their practice-based experiences and knowledge to develop new or improved instructional practices.

Instructional practices developed through teacher inquiry approaches have been shown to support positive learning outcomes for students (Manfra 2019). For multilingual learners, these practices include

- modeling multilingual language
- inspiring curiosity into new languages
- inviting children to make language choices
- differentiating language practices
- discussing multilingualism with families

For more information, see Wagner 2021.

All five of the teachers in the inquiry group spoke English and at least one other language, including Spanish, Russian, or Korean. None spoke the languages of all of their students. Most of these teachers taught in linguistically diverse classrooms with children who did not share a common home language. Language policies—or the languages that are officially supported in classrooms by school policy and administrators—varied across the teachers' schools, but all of the teachers could make language choices that included the use of multiple languages in their instruction.

Each approach to using dual language and non-English books presented in this article pushed these teachers beyond their prior practices to try new ways of using these books with children, typically by modifying lessons within their existing curricula. They drew on observations and artifacts of student learning to inform these practices and to improve them through iterative revisions. What they discovered and tried out often aligned with other research or recommendations on using dual language and non-English books. When this is the case, connections to these studies are made in the sections that follow, even though they may not have directly informed these teachers' practices.

Approach One: Explore Culture and Language

As a way to introduce new cultures to children in her first-grade classroom, Ms. Chung shares The *Name Jar,* by Yangsook Choi, during a class read aloud. This book reflects her own culture and language. By reading it, her students learn that Ms. Chung speaks Korean and has a Korean name like the main character, Unhei.

Throughout the story, Ms. Chung stops at several pages to teach the children how to pronounce Unhei's name. When the story is finished, she tells them that when she was a little girl, she had a difficult time when teachers mispronounced her name. A lot of times, she let teachers say her name incorrectly because she was afraid of not fitting in or being the victim of racist remarks. She pronounces her first name in Korean and asks her students to try to say it. They respond with excitement, as if they have discovered a secret about Ms. Chung. She has given them a chance to explore her culture and language with her.

Dual language and non-English books can introduce children to a range of cultures and languages and help them develop an awareness and appreciation for diverse social identities. Additionally, the books are more likely to show characters who come from varied language and cultural backgrounds.

The above vignette illustrates how dual language and non-English books can be used to center the knowledge teachers and students have about their own social and cultural contexts. Just as Ms. Chung used *The Name Jar* to share about her own cultural and linguistic identity, these books can be a way to explore and learn how students "think about their own identity, about their culture, [and] about their family," as one teacher put it. Exploring these books reinforces the idea that all children have stories to share that reflect their culture, and that these are "in many languages and varieties of language" (Souto-Manning 2016, 268).

Ms. Kim also reported how reading dual language and non-English books in her classroom helped her children show more positive attitudes toward other cultures and appreciate different languages. "My students definitely developed intercultural competency through reading [these] books," she said.

After reading dual language or non-English books, teachers can craft activities that connect with students' and their families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). One teacher observed how the children in her class compared the formal features of letters written in Korean and English in *The Name Jar*. They noticed details like how "in Korean when you write a letter, you don't say 'dear' someone; you just say the name." Writing letters, family narratives, or how-to procedurals are all literacy activities that open spaces for children to draw on their family language practices and cultures. These activities can be linked to the narrative or language features found in many dual language or non-English books.

Approach Two: Engage in Joint Reading

Ms. Chung is reading *Round Is a Tortilla: A Book of Shapes* with Andrea. *Round Is a Tortilla*, by Roseanne Greenfield Thong, is written in English and Spanish. Andrea, a Spanish-English speaker, seems excited to read the book, and she reads each page expressively. Every time she comes to a Spanish word, she hesitates and looks at her teacher. Ms. Chung reads the word for her, and Andrea lights up and repeats it. She knows what the words mean, and she explains them or points to the book's illustrations to show Ms. Chung what they mean. Andrea looks happy that she can teach Ms. Chung the meaning of the words in Spanish.

Later, Andrea looks for other dual language books on her own. She finds another book with Spanish words and reads it to Ms. Chung. This time, she is able to pronounce a few of the Spanish words on her own. Because Ms. Chung has a limited knowledge of Spanish, she never thought she would be able to help a proficient Spanish speaker read in Spanish.

Jointly reading dual language and non-English books can enhance multilingual children's learning. This is especially true if teachers are comfortable reading aloud in a language other than English or familiar enough with a language to pronounce some non-English words.

For example, in the vignette above, Ms. Chung and Andrea divided the tasks of *decoder* and *meaning maker*. Ms. Chung took on the task of decoder by reading the text, including non-English words. Andrea took on the role of meaning maker by providing an explanation of the non-English words or phrases. Meaning making can be based on a child's knowledge of a word as they hear it said aloud, which centers both their knowledge of language sounds and of word meanings. Alternatively, they can use other information in a book—such as context clues in the text or information in pictures—to determine the meaning of non-English words. When used this way, dual language and non-English books position both monolingual and multilingual children as problem solvers who use elements of the text to learn the meaning of new words. This supports vocabulary development and content area learning. It also provides practice with important reading comprehension strategies (Jiménez et al. 2015).

It is important to recognize that some dual language and non-English books use only a few words in a language other than English. For example, Thong writes in *Round Is a Tortilla*, "Round are sombreros. Round is the moon." Books like this present limited non-English language demands and are appropriate for teachers who may have limited confidence or ability in speaking a language other than English. Even when teachers are not able to correctly pronounce all words, creating spaces for multilingualism and positioning oneself as a language learner can be a responsive and empowering example for multilingual learners. It can also model for all children the value in exploring and learning new languages.

Approach Three: Share a New Language

After explaining to her class that books are written in different languages, Ms. Perdomo reads the book *Little Drop,* by Clifford Lewis Ross (which was included in the school's curriculum). In Spanish this translates to *Gotita*. She reads part of the Spanish version first, then part of the book in English.

At first, the Spanish speakers in Ms. Perdomo's class look confused, but then they start to giggle and get excited. One child, who struggles and forces himself to speak English, is so happy he can't sit still. He looks at Ms. Perdomo intently as he hears Spanish coming from her mouth.

After she's done, Ms. Perdomo asks the class how they felt while listening to the story. An English-speaking child says that although he couldn't understand the Spanish reading, he felt good when he was listening to it. Ms. Perdomo is happy that her children have responded to this new experience in such a positive way.

For teachers who are proficient in a language other than English, reading a book in another language allows children to hear and experience that new language. This can be eye-opening. As in the vignette above, teachers can read the story in a non-English language first, then in English. This encourages English-speaking children to make predictions using the book's pictures; they can then test their predictions as they listen in English. Similarly, if teachers read the book in English first, then in another language, children can follow along and try to understand parts of the new language by applying their knowledge of the story.

Reading dual language books aloud can also provide models for *translanguaging*, or moving flexibly between two languages (García & Kleifgen 2019). This can stimulate reflection and discussion on how language is used (Osorio 2020). It can also show

multilingual children that using more than one language to make sense of their world is welcome in the classroom.

Approach Four: Invite Multilingual Guest Readers

Ms. Kim has copies of *The Snowy Day,* by Ezra Jack Keats, in three languages: English, Korean, and Chinese. Although she cannot read a single character in Chinese, she uses that version as a way to involve the Chinese-speaking children in her classroom during the read aloud. A different child volunteers to read the book in each language.

When Jenny begins reading the Chinese version of *The Snowy Day*, Ms. Kim hears the rest of the class saying, "Wow, this is so cool!" Even though most of the children do not speak Chinese, she hears students repeating words as the story progresses. As Jenny reads, Ms. Kim sees a spark in her eyes—this is the first time Jenny has really participated in a class read aloud. She is so excited to share her language, and the other children continue to use some of the Chinese words from the story afterward.

Dual language and non-English books create a reason to invite family and community members into the classroom as guest readers. By leading an instructional activity, these multilingual guests are positioned as important people (Rowe & Fain 2013). This communicates the value of multilingualism to children and fosters connections between school and the community (Naqvi et al. 2012). When children in the classroom read in their home languages, they too become "guest readers."

Because families play a central role in the development and learning of their children, accessing and drawing on their funds of knowledge is critical: it helps to promote productive school-family partnerships, build from children's prior knowledge, and

sustain the language and cultural practices that support children's continued development of healthy relationships in their homes and communities (NAEYC 2019; Curtin & Reynolds 2022).

As an alternative to in-person guests, Souto-Manning (2016) suggests that teachers ask family or community members to record themselves reading a book in their home languages. (For more information on this, see "Listen to What We Hear: Developing Community Responsive Listening Centers," by Emily Brown Hoffman and Kristin Cipollone, in the Fall 2021 issue of *Young Children*.) Just as with inviting multilingual speakers into the classroom, the goal is to make reading and listening to books in non-English languages accessible and part of the class's learning. This is an important part of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2020).

Getting Started

We offer these books as a starting point for teachers because we have used them in our own classrooms and instruction and found them to be quality texts. Each text provides examples of rich language use, includes meaningful content, and can be connected to common topics in early childhood instructional units.



El Chupacabras, by Adam Rubin and Crash McCreery. 2018. (English/Spanish)



La Frontera: El Viaje con Papa (My Journey with Papa), by Alfredo Alva, Deborah Mills, and Claudia Navarro. 2018. (English/Spanish)



Niño Wrestles the World, by Yuyi Morales. 2013. (English/Spanish)



Todos Iguales: Un Corrido De Lemon Grove/All Equal: A Ballad of Lemon Grove, by Christy Hale. 2019. (English/Spanish)



The Ugly Vegetables, by Grace Lin. 2001. (English/Chinese)

Approach Five: Make Books Accessible for Children to Find and Explore

During independent reading, Amy, a Chinese-English speaker, excitedly approaches Ms. Chung. "Look what I'm reading," she says, holding up a copy of *I Hate English,* by Ellen Levine, from the classroom library. "There's Chinese in here!"

Amy shares the book with a friend, and Ms. Chung notices the two pointing to different Chinese characters and going back to the book multiple times. Ms. Chung sees that the pictures and

Chinese characters appeal to the children and that Amy has found a way to engage in conversation with her classmate through the Chinese language in this book.

Teachers can place dual language and non-English books—including digital texts such as e-books and audiobooks—throughout the classroom for students to find and explore. This extends the books into unstructured learning spaces and encourages students to investigate language on their own terms. For many multilingual children, encountering books in their own languages provides opportunities to build confidence and make connections to literacy by allowing them to explore written language in ways that are comfortable, safe, and absent of the pressures of structured instruction. For others, it can spur curiosity about language.

In the vignette above, Amy's discovery of the Chinese characters in *I Hate English* not only spurred her excitement about the book but also led to discussions with a classmate. Ms. Chung set aside a time for Amy to read the book with her, which provided additional opportunities for Amy to share what she knew about Chinese characters.

When creating a classroom library that includes dual language and non-English books, teachers will ideally be able to include books in a diverse range of languages. While these should include the languages that children in the classroom read or speak, they can also include other languages that may be new to students. Spanish-language books are widely accessible in the United States, but building a classroom library with quality texts in all languages may require visiting specialty and online bookstores or asking for recommendations from members of the community.

Conclusion

The five approaches outlined here provide entry points for teachers to start using dual language and non-English books in their early childhood classrooms. (See "Getting Started" above for a list of suggested titles.) By introducing these books and/or extending their roles, teachers show that multilingualism is valued in the classroom. They also show that multilinguals—and their diversity of languages, cultures, and lived experiences—are valued. This is a critical foundation for all children to feel empowered to embrace their curiosity and interests in language learning and for creating more inclusive and equitable early childhood classrooms.

Resources for Dual Language and Non-English Books

These resources and booksellers provide a starting point for teachers searching for dual language and non-English books for their classrooms.

- "Quick Guide for Teachers: Selecting and Using Culturally Appropriate Children's Books in Languages Other Than English" includes a list of vendors who sell books in a wide range of languages. It is published by the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning. eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/select-cultural-childrens-books-non-english-eng.pdf
- "Beyond Spanish: Building Truly Multilingual Classroom and School Libraries," by Austin Curtin and Dan Reynolds (2022), provides guidance on how to find and select quality texts in languages other than English and Spanish. It also includes information on finding award-winning children's books in other languages.
- Scholastic sells a collection of popular texts in Spanish.
- ChinaSprout sells a range of popular and lesser-known children's books in English and Chinese, including books written in both traditional and simplified Chinese characters.
- Epic! is a popular online library of e-books that includes a selection of bilingual texts.

Photograph: © Getty Images

Copyright © 2023 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at NAEYC.org/resources/permissions.

References

Barac, R., E. & Bialystok. 2011. "Cognitive Development of Bilingual Children." *Language Teaching: Surveys and Studies* 44 (1): 36–54.

Bowers, E.P., & M. Vasilyeva. 2011. "The Relation Between Teacher Input and the Lexical Growth of Preschoolers." *Applied Psycholinguistics* 32 (1): 221–241.

Burchinal, M., S. Field, M.L. López, C. Howes, & R. Pianta. 2012. "Instruction in Spanish in Pre-Kindergarten Classrooms and Child Outcomes for English Language Learners." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 27: 188–197.

Castro, D.C., M. Páez, D.K. Dickinson, & E. Frede. 2011. "Promoting Language and Literacy in Young Dual Language Learners: Research, Practice, and Policy." *Child Development Perspectives* 5 (1): 1 –21.

Chen, X. 2019. "Selecting and Using Dual Language Books in Classrooms and Beyond." *NABE Journal of Research and Practice* 9 (3–4): 191–197.

Cochran-Smith, M., & S. Lytle. 2009. *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research in the Next Generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Curtin, A., & D. Reynolds. 2022. "Beyond Spanish: Building Truly Multilingual Classroom and School Libraries." *Language Arts* 99 (5): 343–347.

Garces-Bacsal, R.M. 2022. "Diverse Books for Diverse Children: Building an Early Childhood Diverse Booklist for Social and Emotional Learning. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 22 (1): 66–95.

García, O., & J.A. Kleifgen. 2019. "Translanguaging and Literacies." *Reading Research Quarterly* 55(4): 553–571.

Huang, Q.Y., & X. Chen. 2016. "Examining Text Quality of English/Chinese Bilingual Children's Picture Books." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 5 (19): 475–487.

Jiménez, R.T., S. David, K. Fagan, V.J. Risko, M. Pacheco, L. Pray, & M. Gonzales. 2015. "Using Translation to Drive Conceptual Development for Students Becoming Literate in English as an Additional Language." *Research in the Teaching of English* 49 (3): 248–271.

Manfra, M.M. 2019. "Action Research and Systematic, Intentional Change in Teaching Practice." *Review of Research in Education* 43: 163–196.

Moll, L.C., C. Amanti, D. Neff, & N. Gonzalez. 1992. "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms." *Theory Into Practice* 31 (2): 132–141.

NAEYC. 2019. "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

NAEYC. 2020. "Developmentally Appropriate Practice." Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents.

Naqvi, R., A. McKeough, K. Thorne, & C. Pfitscher. 2012. "Dual-Language Books as an Emergent-Literacy Resource: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 13 (4): 501–528.

Osorio, S.L. 2020. "Building Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Spaces for Emergent Bilinguals: Using Read-Alouds to Promote Translanguaging." *The Reading Teacher* 74 (2): 127–135.

Rowe, D., & J.G. Fain. 2013. "The Family Backpack Project: Responding to Dual-Language Texts through Family Journals." *Language Arts* 90 (6): 402–416.

Sharma, S.A., & T. Christ. 2017. "Five Steps Toward Successful Culturally Relevant Text Selection and Integration. *The Reading Teacher* 71 (3): 295–307.

Sneddon, R. 2008. "Magda and Albana: Learning to Read with DL Books." *Language and Education* 22 (2): 137–154.

Souto-Manning, M. 2016. "Honoring and Building on the Rich Literacy Practices of Young Bilingual and Multilingual Learners." *The Reading Teacher* 70 (3): 263–271.

Wagner, C.J. 2021. "Teacher Language Practices that Support Multilingual Learners: Classroom-Based Approaches from Multilingual Early Childhood Teachers. *TESOL Journal* 12 (3): 1–16.

Wagner, C.J. In press. "Practice-Based Learning Through Online Teacher Inquiry: Connecting Literacy Teachers in Specialized and Isolated Locations." In *Teaching Literacies in Diverse Contexts*, eds. S. Harmey & B. Kabuto. London, UK: UCL Press.

Audience: *Administrator (director or principal)*, *Faculty*, *Student (higher education)*, *Teacher*

Topics: *Child Development*, *Language*, *Other Topics*, *Equity*, *Dual Language Learners*, *Subject Areas*, *Literacy*, *Children's Books*, *Reading*, *YC*

CHRISTOPHER J. WAGNER

Christopher J. Wagner, PhD, is assistant professor and director of the literacy education program in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, City University of New York. He teaches and researches on early literacy, multilingual learners, and professional learning. christopher.wagner@qc.cuny.edu

---

JEEIN CHUNG

Jeein Chung, MSEd, is a special education teacher in a public elementary school located in New York, New York. Jeein has primarily worked with students in grades K–2 and has worked with students of diverse backgrounds and learning needs.

CHELSEA KIM

Chelsea Kim, MSEd, is currently a public school educator in Queens, New York, and has been teaching second grade for the last five years.

YARITZA PERDOMO

Yaritza Perdomo, MSEd, is a lead 3K teacher at Garden School in Queens, New York. Yaritza has worked in several diverse school communities where every child is encouraged to make their intelligence shine. yperdomo@gardenschool.org

© National Association for the Education of Young Children
1401 H Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005 | (202)232-8777 | (800)424-2460 | help@naeyc.org