

Using *Libros*: The Emergent Bi-literacy Development of Spanish-speaking Children

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Abstract

The recent educational climate in the United States created by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes assessment and accountability of all children. However, despite almost a decade of federal policies and regulations, English Language Learners (ELLs) continue to be at a disadvantage when assessed on state and federal standardized tests, especially in the area of reading performance (US DOE, 2009). This paper presents data from a multi-year home-literacy initiative, *Libros de Familia*, in which university-level student volunteers read and are read to by Spanish-speaking migrant farmworker children. The children who participate in the project are in pre-kindergarten through 10th grades; however, this study focuses on one subset of children in pre-kindergarten through three. The data derive from a quantitative study of seven such children and from qualitative data describing the university-level student volunteers' perceptions and experiences of the project. We specifically sought to understand how the children became engaged in reading and how this appeared to impact their emergent literacy development. Findings show that the children demonstrate knowledge of the connection between their first (Spanish) and second (English) languages. Findings also reveal that, in addition to providing access to books and motivating children to read, literacy engagement for this population also entails relationship-building between the children and the project volunteers.

Introduction

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, few can deny the current educational climate of assessment and accountability, which emphasizes performance outcomes in core educational areas such as mathematics and reading for children in the United States. The Act marks a departure from the 1980s' emphasis of equitable educational opportunities and an embrace of equal educational outcomes through assessments conducted via student testing (Moore, 2007). This shift has largely affected immigrant, language minority students who are expected to reach the same educational performance levels on standardized tests as native-English speakers. Thus, in educational terms, immigrant, non-native English-speaking children face the difficult task of attaining native-like educational outcomes in achievement on standardized tests under the pressures of time limits and educational accountability.

One subgroup of students vulnerable to these pressures include the children of migrant farmworkers who work in agriculture and related industries

(namely dairy and fishing) and follow seasonal harvests in pursuit of labor. While not all migrant workers are immigrants to the U.S., an estimated 78 percent are (NAWS, 2005). Moreover, of those who are migrant workers, 85 percent are Spanish-speakers and 75 percent are born in Mexico (NAWS, 2005). The work of migrants is labor-intensive, inconsistent (due to seasonality), and frequently hazardous. Furthermore, migrant workers earn poverty level wages with an estimated median income of less than \$10,000 per year (NAWS, 2005). While several studies have been conducted with this population (e.g., Ezell et al., 2000; López, 1999), we know little about the reading performance and reading engagement of young children who are Spanish-speaking migrants.

The Florida Context

Florida is “home” to between 200,000 and 350,000 of the U.S.’s estimated 2.5 million migrant farmworkers (Riley, 2002), though exact data are difficult to obtain due to the nature of migrant work. Many of these workers harvest seasonal crops, such as oranges, in the southern region of the state. North Florida, where this study took place, is home to an increasing number of migrant farmworkers who work in the peanut, hay, dairy, and blueberry industries. The children of migrant workers qualify for federal supplemental educational assistance under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), provided they move across school district lines more frequently than every 36 months, while their parents follow seasonal, agricultural work (Pappamihiel, 2004). Overall, migrant children are frequently poor, come from Spanish-speaking homes, and experience high rates of mobility, all of which negatively impact their educational experiences and academic achievement. The ways in which schools outreach to families, including use of both linguistically and culturally appropriate programs and practices, affect the educational experiences of these non-native English-speaking migrant children.

In 2006-7 there were 38,047 students, from pre-kindergarten to grade 12, who qualified and received migrant education support under Title I in Florida. Because many of the migrant students are native-Spanish speakers, they simultaneously qualify for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) services. In fact, in Florida, there are approximately 250,000 English language learners (ELLs) in public schools, about 75% of whom are Spanish-speakers (FL DOE, 2007; MacDonald, 2004).

Most of these students participate in mainstream English-only educational settings, as outlined under the Florida Consent Decree (FL DOE, 1990). The Decree was the 1990 result of a legal case brought by a coalition of Florida organizations that sued the state of Florida, arguing that the state’s failure to provide adequately-trained teachers for ELLs resulted in those students’ poor academic performance. The State agreed to mandate ESOL preparation for new and practicing teachers in a language program model referred to as “inclusion” (MacDonald, 2004). In that model, the most widely-spread and preferred program type in Florida, ELLs are placed in mainstream, “inclusive” classrooms with teachers who have met the minimum training requirements under the Decree (MacDonald, 2004). However, little is known about the effectiveness of the mainstream, inclusion model in terms of its

influence on the achievement of ELLs in the state of Florida. We also know little about the specific ways in which second language literacy develops for those children, though current studies are underway that investigate teacher preparation and the performance of ELLs in Florida (Author, 2008b).

Overview of the Study

The impetus for the current study came from a multi-year home-literacy initiative, *Libros de Familia*, in which university-level student volunteers (“student volunteers” or “volunteers”) bring bilingual and monolingual (either Spanish or English) books to Spanish-speaking migrant children and provide literacy support (Author, 2008a) through reading to the children or being read to by the children. The student volunteers generally work in pairs, with at least one having Spanish-language competency. In a given academic year, there are about 15 migrant families (30-40 children) and about 30 student volunteers who are trained to work with them. All of the families in the home-literacy project qualify as migrant and most of them are also immigrant (Author, 2008a).

In the course of the project, student volunteers frequently request to continue across semesters and academic years to work with the same families and children. They report both the strength of the relationship that they build with the children as well as the ways in which they tap into the children’s unique life experiences to engage them in literacy. As we continued the project and observed children and volunteers over a period of three years, we noted the ways in which the children were engaged in literacy development and book reading at home and we wanted to know more about how that occurred. Thus, the present study investigated the literacy engagement of Spanish-speaking, migrant farmworker children participating in the home-literacy initiative. In this paper we present findings from a study that investigated the children’s literacy engagement who participated in the *Libros de Familia* project. The study was guided by two research questions: How does a home literacy initiative project, *Libros de Familia*, appear to affect children’s emergent literacy development? And how are Spanish-speaking migrant children engaged in reading through the *Libros* project?

We used quantitative research methods through a holistic literacy rubric that measured the gains in literacy development in seven migrant children with whom student volunteers worked and qualitative research methods, (including interviews, a reading observation protocol, and document analysis. In this paper we review literature related to literacy engagement, present preliminary findings from the study, and offer suggestions for educators and stakeholders working with this population. We now turn to a review of literature that presents the theoretical framework that guided this work.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Various scholars have discussed the importance of literacy engagement as an aspect of literacy development. In this section, we discuss literacy engagement as the theoretical framework that guided this study. We define literacy in this study as the ability to read, specifically, using skills to interact with

and interpret print materials. Though we use this definition, we are keenly aware of nontraditional literacies (New London Group, 1996) as well as varied literacies, such as oral literacies and religious iconography that exist in migrant family homes (Author, 2008a). Literacy engagement, as we review it here, includes motivation, learning strategies, affirmation of students' identity, choice of text, and access to books.

Student Motivation

Literacy engagement entails the disposition “for thinking deeply and using strategies for learning from text,” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 4). Synonymous with “engaged reading,” literacy engagement requires students who are “active and energized in reading” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 4) and who read frequently in a focused manner. Unlike literacy development, literacy engagement is not necessarily centered on effort, hard work, or completing a routine task quickly. Moreover, students who demonstrate literacy engagement do not read for tangible rewards such as points or gold stars as do students who are extrinsically motivated to read. Instead, engaged readers are driven by “curiosity, involvement, preference for challenge, and a desire to read” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 4). These intrinsic motivators propel students to increase the amount of their reading and contribute to their ongoing literacy development and academic achievement.

Learning Strategies

While, as Guthrie points out, intrinsic motivation is key to literacy engagement, teachers can provide support to existing engaged readers and help cultivate new ones through adopting various strategies in their classrooms. Scholars from fields as varied as cognitive psychology, bilingualism, and semiotics have suggested that such support includes the activation of students' prior knowledge, scaffolding meaning to enhance comprehension and use of language, and extending their knowledge of language (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Cummins, 2000).

Triggering students' pre-existing knowledge is critical to their ongoing learning, according to Cummins. For example, if a teacher is unsure about students' pre-existing knowledge of a given topic, he/she can “brainstorm” about it. The teacher would announce the topic and have students, in a group discussion, volunteer what they know about it. The discussion would be captured either by the teacher or a student on a chalkboard, chart paper, or a transparency (Christen & Murphy, 1991).

Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) underlined the importance of pre-existing knowledge by stating that

Every opportunity should be taken to extend and enrich children's background knowledge and understanding in every way possible, for the ultimate significance and memorability of any word or text depends on whether children possess the background knowledge and conceptual sophistication to understand its meaning. (p. 219)

Pre-existing knowledge is particularly important for second language (L2) students because their first language (L1) acts as a support to learning the new language and content. Students “should be engaged to use their L1 [and] should be encouraged to use their L2 to activate and extend this knowledge (e.g., by brainstorming in groups or by carrying out internet research in the L1)” (Cummins, in print). In fact, research suggests that “encouraging students to use their L1 when necessary to complete a group task can result in higher quality of L2 output than when students are prohibited from L1 use” (Swain & Lapkin, 2005).

Equally important is scaffolding meaning. Educators use scaffolding to provide learners with temporary supports without which the learners could not perform tasks or achieve at academically higher levels. Typical supports are: (1) activating prior knowledge, discussed above; (2) modifying linguistic input in a form more comprehensible to students through visual aids, demonstrations, dramatization, acting out meanings, and explanation of words and linguistic structures; and (3) supporting students in the use of the L2 in both written and oral forms (Cummins, in press). Cummins suggests that teachers can support students’ use of L2 through writing frames. Writing frames integrate content area reading with writing. They are characterized by a skeleton outline that scaffolds children’s non-fiction or fiction writing. Struggling readers can benefit from writing frames because they provide a structure for students to organize their thoughts (Fowler 1982; Nichols 1980) as can English language learners. They allow students to learn the structure of various types of writing, for example, science reports and formal letters.

Extending students’ awareness of language is another critical support. As students advance through school, they must read increasingly complex materials in content areas of the curriculum (e.g., science, social studies, mathematics, and literature). These materials have difficult concepts, technical vocabularies that use low frequency words with Greek and Latin origins, and sophisticated grammatical and syntactic constructions. Students who master these competencies acquire academic language, that is, text not used in common speech. In order to achieve this high level of competence, students must read prodigiously both in school and outside of it. L2 learners can especially benefit from extending their awareness of language because their L1, when tapped into as a resource, can act as a cognitive tool in acquiring the L2. Students extend their awareness of language and its mechanics by comparing and contrasting L1 and L2 (Cummins, in press). Students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds can use English and Spanish cognates as resources. Cognates are words related in origin. That is, certain Spanish and English words descend from the same ancestral root, usually Latin. Cognates are especially facilitative in expanding literacy through enlargement of vocabulary in the L2.

Another learning strategy involves social interaction among students. Social interaction includes sharing questions, opinions, and newly-gained information. It also involves group or pair work in researching information or team-writing a report (Guthrie, 2004, p. 13). Through collaboration and discourse around a diversity of text types, students may find that they are more motivated to use comprehension strategies and, accordingly, increase the amount of their reading.

Affirmation of Students' Identity

Literacy engagement involves affirmation of students' identity. When teachers affirm the identities of children in the classroom through positive and culturally sensitive interactions, students become engaged in their own learning (Cummins, in press). According to Auerbach, individual learners and their culture play a critical role in such acquisition. For their part, "learners bring their own knowledge to texts in order to make sense of them" (Auerbach, 1996, p. 10). Moreover, the learners' reading processes are molded by their cultural familiarity with content and forms of texts. Importantly, Auerbach (1996) notes further that "[l]earners become proficient to the extent that instruction is connected to their background knowledge, life experiences, and communicative purposes" (p. 10). Her view differs significantly from the idea that literacy acquisition involves a set of discrete, mechanical skills that connect sounds and symbols, a major thrust of literacy assessment under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and findings from the National Reading Panel (2000).

Educators can affirm the identities of L2 learners through examining their own interactions with students to reflect upon the technical efficacy of instruction. They can also affirm students by acknowledging the whole child in ways that relate to students' personal life experiences as well as their cultural, and linguistic identities. In contrast, non-affirmation of students' identities reinforces unequal relationships that ultimately harm students' spirit and, undoubtedly, interfere with learning (Cummins, 2001).

Choice of Text

In some classrooms, students make decisions about the texts used in learning. Such choices give students a degree of ownership over their literacy development. Consequently, students "dig deeper for meaning, monitor their understanding, and express their newfound knowledge more elaborately than do students without these choices and decisions about their learning" (Guthrie, 2004, p. 12). An example of choice is the free voluntary reading (FVR) programs in the US advocated by Krashen (2004). Students read books of interest to them during a designated time period in school. If they do not like the books they are reading, they set them aside and choose another book. They do not write reports or answer questions but rather discuss with the teacher and the other students what they have read (Krashen, 2004, pp. 1-2). Nor do they receive rewards such as points or gold stars as do students who are extrinsically motivated to read (Guthrie, 2004, p. 4). In contrast to FVR, Accelerated Reader (AR) programs allow students to (1) choose books from a list, (2) work at their own pace, (3) answer comprehension questions on a computer, and (4) qualify for rewards. In relation to rewards, Krashen notes that studies on the efficacy on rewards are few; he mentioned a study by McLoyd that suggests that rewards actually hinder reading (Krashen, 2004, pp. 119-122).

Access to Books

A final issue regarding ways to support literacy engagement is a practical one, that is, how to ensure that existing and potential engaged readers have

access to books. Krashen suggests several commonsense ways to ensure books are available. “A print-rich environment in the home is related to how much children read; children who read more have more books in the home” (Krashen, 2004, p. 57). Thus, efforts must be made to get books into homes, which is the core purpose of the *Libros de Familia* project, described below. Moreover, better class libraries as well as better school libraries result in more reading. Finally, access to public libraries increase reading (Krashen, 2004, pp. 58-60).

Importantly, families from non-mainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds may not have access to books or home storytime reading practices. For example, one author (Author, 2008a) found that Mexican farmworking families had limited home reading materials in either the L1 (Spanish) or L2 (English). Those families did, however, have strong oral literacy traditions that were passed on through generations, as well as religious print and related icons that were referred to, read, and interpreted in the home.

The foregoing factors comprise what we refer to as literacy engagement. What the factors do not address specifically, but what we propose here, is the respective role of the student and the teacher in literacy engagement. Guthrie suggests that literacy engagement is an attitude possessed by a student and from his idea, we propose that for students from nontraditional backgrounds or with nontraditional literacies practiced in the home, literacy engagement includes a “human relationship” factor—that is, the interaction, care, and support that occurs between two people around literacy. For various reasons, a given student is an active and energized reader. This attitude lies within the student as an intrinsic motivator that draws him/her to read. External factors do not appear to act as a motivation (Guthrie, 2004, p. 4). Thus the student will be an engaged reader because of something within him/herself.

While the student assumes the role of engaged reader, the teacher can set the stage for literacy engagement by the other factors set out above. The teacher shows the student learning strategies, affirms the student’s identity, and ensures the student has a choice of books and access to them. Under this framework, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator in helping students become engaged readers and may have the opportunity to help the student activate his/her engagement in reading. In this paper we will show how one home-literacy initiative has successfully helped students achieve higher literacy development and also helped propel them into the world of engaged readers. Thus, the dual goals of literacy development literacy engagement are enhanced by the initiative. The study provides empirical evidence, both quantitative and qualitative to support its findings.

Methods

Data Collection Methods

In order to answer the research questions regarding literacy engagement for the participating children in the *Libros de Familia* project, we used both qualitative and quantitative research methods and techniques. Collection of the quantitative data took place over one 15-week semester, in spring 2008. Although the *Libros* project was initiated in fall of 2005, this was the first quantitative study undertaken around the project.

The qualitative techniques included interviews with the children (both an intake interview by the project coordinator and note taking by the volunteers during their reading time with the children), and the collection of book logs by the volunteers to describe their reading time with the children. The initial intake interview consisted of information asked of the children participating in *Libros*. The *Libros* director arranged to have a coordinator collect those data via an intake protocol. The coordinator traveled to each child's home early in January, 2008, and obtained information from the children and parents. The coordinator asked specifically about the children's goals, favorite sports and hobbies, places, foods, etc. This information was compiled and was also used by volunteers to get to know the child/ren they read to. Moreover, the volunteers used the information to identify reading materials that related directly to the children's interests, hobbies, and life experiences.

In addition to the intake interview, weekly book logs detailed the books chosen by the volunteers and/or children and those books actually read with the children. The logs included space for observation notes, and the volunteers were instructed to document the types and genre of books that the children preferred. They were also instructed to observe how the children were engaged in reading during the weekly visits to the children's homes. For example, if the children wished to re-read the same book several times, this was noted. Also, books that were left in the home from week-to-week, as requested by the children to re-read on their own, were also noted on the book logs.

As a final qualitative data collection technique, we utilized volunteer course papers to understand the volunteers' experiences and interactions with the children around L2 literacy, that is, their perceptions and experiences of how the children were engaged in reading based on the goals of the *Libros* project and how the children were developing literacy in English and Spanish. About two-thirds of the volunteers working with the *Libros* project were enrolled in an education course on Cross Cultural Communication, which required a minimum 10-hour service learning commitment. The course paper was a critical reflection of working with this group of children and issues related to language and literacy development. The papers were gathered after the end of the semester and end of the *Libros* project.

In conjunction with the qualitative data collection, we also provided a three-hour workshop to train student volunteers. The focus of the training was threefold: (a) to provide a background on migrant farmworkers and their children and the unique educational challenges faced by migrant families; (b) to describe and organize the *Libros de Familia* project by pairing student volunteers and arranging for the first home visit; and (c) to train volunteers on L2 reading with bilingual children. In this last activity, the *Libros* director, with help from the coordinator and Migrant Education program staff, modeled reading strategies for volunteers using bilingual books. While this was only an initial training, it served to provide beginning strategies for new project volunteers who might not have had training in literacy development. Thirty-four participants attended the training workshop in January.

For the quantitative data collection we used a rubric to identify the children's emergent literacy development and any changes observed during the semester. The rubric was designed by the *Libros* director, in conjunction with the migrant education project coordinator. The assessment items on the rubric related to each child's Literacy Skill or Knowledge. Each item was scored from

one to four. One indicated no evidence; two indicated very limited evidence; three indicated some evidence; and four indicated apparent evidence or mastery of the item. The items included the following demonstrations of literacy:

- 1) Purpose for reading
- 2) Book directionality
- 3) Directionality of print
- 4) Sound-symbol correspondence
- 5) Sight words
- 6) Knowledge of main characters
- 7) Knowledge of setting
- 8) Comprehension of main ideas of story (plot)
- 9) Makes predictions based on pictures and/or title
- 10) Predicts outcome of story
- 11) Summarizes or recounts story accurately
- 12) Makes connections to his/her life
- 13) Makes connections to other text
- 14) Demonstrates knowledge of relationship between L1 and L2 (cognates or sound)

The rubric, designed for preschool and early elementary grade students, was utilized at the beginning of the semester (as a pre-test measure) and at the end of the semester (as a post-test); thus, there were two data points using the rubric. We used quantitative methods, namely descriptive statistics, to determine a pre-mean score and a post-mean score. We then compared the scores across the two data collection points.

Via the final data item of the rubric “Demonstrates knowledge of relationship between L1 and L2 (cognates or sound),” we sought to understand how the children used knowledge of their first language, Spanish, to understand and decode text in English. This included the children’s recognition of cognates in English and Spanish and/or the different phonological systems of the two languages. We were informed of this by reviews of research that show a strong relationship between first language literacy and second language literacy (see Goldenberg, 2008; National Literacy Panel, 2006). Because all of the children were native Spanish speakers and were (or would be) attending monolingual, English-only schools with literacy instruction in English, we believed that ongoing first language development would help to support overall literacy development for the children.

Participant Selection and Identification

The children who participated in the *Libros de Familia* project were identified by the local Office of Migrant Education. All of the families were eligible for and receiving supplementary migrant education support services through Migrant Education. In order to qualify for migrant education services, the families had to have entered this school district within the prior 36 months. In addition, the parents had to be working in the agriculture, dairy, or fishing industries at the time of the study. Though not a migrant education requirement, all of the participants were native Spanish speakers and were identified as receiving ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) services

by the district. For this study, we identified seven young children who ranged from pre-kindergarten through third grade. The ages of the children were from four to nine years old. As noted, all of the children were native Spanish speakers. In addition, they used Spanish as the primary language in the home for communication and were from low SES backgrounds.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, all of the documents (i.e., intake interview forms, book logs, field notes from volunteers, course papers, and rubric pre- and post-test data) were compiled. We first analyzed data from the rubric by noting demonstration of children's emergent literacy in January, 2008 and then comparing that with the post-test from the rubric in May, 2008 (after one semester). We compiled information by each child by using the intake interview information, book logs, and field notes. In our analysis of qualitative data, we identified patterns related to the construct of "literacy engagement" along the dimensions outlined by our literature review, namely Guthrie (2004) and Cummins (2000; 2001) (above). However, we also allowed for new patterns around literacy engagement to emerge. This occurred when we identified themes that either did not fit or refuted the existing categories of engagement.

By putting together this information, we learned about (a) the literacy engagement and practices around literacy used by each of the volunteers with a particular child and (b) the preferences and ways in which the child preferred to engage in reading. Upon analyzing the data, we noticed two main themes: first, that the children were developing knowledge of both Spanish and English (as emergent bilinguals); and secondly that the relationship between the volunteers and the children appeared to be a key factor in the literacy engagement in the homes of migrant Spanish-speaking children in the project. At the end of the semester, we asked the volunteers to speak about their work with *Libros* as well. All of the volunteers who read with these seven children in this study noted the relationship that emerged in their work with the children. This confirmed for us the key of developing a supportive and consistent relationship around literacy for children at risk of failing (or in the case of Florida, not passing the third grade Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or FCAT) in school and advancing to fourth grade. Below we present findings from the data.

Findings

Libros and Bi-literacy Development

The first research question asked how the *Libros* project appeared to affect the emergent literacy development of the seven Spanish-speaking children. We understand that the children were enrolled in pre-kindergarten through grade three and that their overall literacy development was likely highly influenced by school instruction; however, this occurred only in English because of Florida's inclusion of ELLs in mainstream classrooms. In this study, we used the holistic literacy rubric and observations to learn about if and how the children were developing in two languages. All seven children who participated showed gains in literacy development from February through April of 2008.

Descriptive statistical data revealed by the pre-test rubric showed an average score of 10.8. The post test, using the same rubric and administered about 10 weeks later, indicated a mean score of 11.7. There were several areas in which students' scores increased.

One unexpected finding was that the most frequent area in which the children showed gains was in their knowledge of the relationship between the first language (Spanish) and the second language (English). The two areas in which the children demonstrated this relationship was with cognates (that is, words of similar linguistic origin that have similar meaning [e.g., education in English, education in Spanish]) and sounds (such as using knowledge of Spanish sounds to decode English). Because of the emphasis in the *Libros* project on the development of two languages (Spanish and English) among the children, it seems likely that those gains were largely attributable to the *Libros* bilingual student volunteers who provided both L1 and L2 literacy support. As stated earlier, at least one of the volunteers in the team was bilingual and biliterate in English and Spanish. As the volunteers read to the children, they made the children aware of the relationship between the two languages. The classrooms, on the other hand, were sites of monolingual, English-only instruction, and the students' first language was not used for literacy development purposes. Thus, the preliminary findings from this study reveal that bilingual reading is likely to contribute to students' awareness of the relationship between the first and second languages. This finding has implications for English language literacy development of ELLs, an important aspect of second language reading according to the National Literacy Panel report (2006).

In addition, data from the holistic literacy rubric revealed that the younger students showed greater overall gains in emergent literacy than did most of the older students; however, the areas in which those gains occurred were different. Miguel, for example, demonstrated knowledge of main characters, knowledge of setting, knowledge of plot, and story recount. Giovanna demonstrated gains in sound symbol correspondence and knowledge of sight words, story recount, demonstrating knowledge of the relationship between L1 and L2, and making connections between the story and her life.

As with one of the kindergartner children, three out of four of the older students in grades two and three (Lucas, Billy, and Linda) demonstrated knowledge of the relationship between the L1 and L2. Moreover, the older students demonstrated gains in the following areas: predicting the outcome of the story (Javier); and knowledge of the main characters and setting as well as making connections with other text and making life connections (Linda). These findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Student gain areas in L2 Reading (Names are pseudonyms)

	Lucas (G-3)	Javier (G-3)	Billy (G-2)	Linda (G-2)	Giovanna (K)	Miguel (K)	Joel (Pre-K)
Comprehension of Main Ideas (Plot)							
Connections with Life							
Connections with Other Text							
Directionality of Print							
Knowledge of Main Characters							
Knowledge of Relationship Between L1 & L2							
Knowledge of Setting							
Knowledge of Sight Words							
Predicts Outcome							
Sound-Symbol Correspondence							
Summarizes Story							

Libros and Literacy Engagement

The second research question asked how Spanish-speaking migrant children are engaged in reading and in what ways while participating in the *Libros de Familia* project. As discussed earlier, there are several areas of “literacy engagement,” including access to books, choice of text, identity affirmation of the students, learning strategies, and student motivation.

The logistical nature of the *Libros* project meant that children had increased access to books, as well as a range of texts from which to choose.

Volunteers made weekly visits and brought books to the homes of children. Before each visit, volunteers identified reading materials that reflected the interests of the children and brought a range of materials to the children's home at each meeting. The range of materials provided younger children with the opportunity to choose books based on their interests. For older children, the volunteers provided longer chapter books to read over the course of the semester; however, these also reflected the interests and background of the children. One volunteer, Sarah, noted, "during our eight weeks visiting the family, we brought over 60 library books into their home and took turns reading with each of the children one-on-one. We went for an hour each week and spent half the time reading and half the time doing post-reading activities." This number of books was not unusual, as volunteers were aware that, given the rural nature of the community and long work schedule of the parents, access to books was a challenge for the families.

In addition to access and choice, the *Libros* volunteers frequently noted how they engaged the children by identifying reading materials that related to the children's interests and background. At the initial first meeting volunteers met the children and interviewed them. Through the interviews, they identified the interests of the children and gained a sense of who the children were, their reading abilities, and their interests (hobbies, friends, home activities). This information was then used by the volunteers to choose materials that the children would like to read. One student volunteer described this process:

One of the things that excited me most about this opportunity was going to the library to pick out appropriate books for the children... I looked forward to going to the library to choose books for the three children. It became easier to select books for each of them after spending time with them and becoming familiar with their reading abilities and interests.

A second volunteer noted, "[Giovanna] had stated when we first met that she liked scary movies and books. Therefore, I went out and bought two *Goosebumps* books to read with her throughout the semester and allowed her to keep the books at the end of the semester." The volunteers repeatedly underscored how they identified reading materials that reflected the children's interests or background as a way to engage them in reading. Using the children's interests and background was an important way in which their identities were affirmed.

In addition to reinforcing the interests of the children, the reading materials and language frequently reflected their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is important to note here that bilingual (English-Spanish) books were available to the volunteers to sign out at the *Libros* director's office and that children also requested books that were in English only, as with books requested from their Accelerated Readers (AR) list, or books that they saw their peers reading at school, as with *Goosebumps*. Through a small grant through the state Department of Education, the *Libros* director acquired a number of bilingual and multicultural reading materials. Much of the material was bilingual, and the majority of books available were written by Latino authors. Some of the materials included *Chato's Kitchen* (Gary Soto), *La Casa en Mango Street / The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros), *En Mi Familia /*

In My Family (Carmen Lomas Garza), and *A Spoon for Every Bite / Cada Bocado con Nueva Cuchara* (Joe Hayes), as well as translations of books such as *Harry Potter y la Piedra Filosofal* (J. K. Rowling). Because the emphasis of the project was on literacy engagement, it was not a requirement that volunteers use only bilingual books; rather, volunteers were guided to make informed decisions about book materials based on the children's interests, as well as factors relating to their identity, such as linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Based on the findings from this exploratory study on literacy engagement, we believe that the children in the *Libros* program had the motivation to read due in part to the areas noted above. However, findings from the study also revealed a "human relationship" factor, that is, the volunteers and children formed mutually beneficial and affirming relationships. Social interaction via human engagement and relationships that were built during the semester were highly rewarding for the children, their parents, and the student volunteers alike. One volunteer described this relationship that was forged around reading:

I found myself being grateful of [sic] the children's appreciation of us and excitement of reading. Every week they would run out to see us when we arrived. I have never seen children so excited about reading before! One of them would always grab our library bag and dump out the books to see which ones we brought.

She continued by discussing how she appreciated the children and began to question her own prior assumptions about migrant workers, noting:

This project caused me to reflect on the stereotypes and generalizations that I have heard about migrant workers and their families and helped me to see the positive things that they bring to society. First of all, we never saw the father of the children because he works long hours. It is because of his hard work that I am able to eat. Before this project, I had never been around migrants, so I never knew what to expect. However, I have learned that they are wonderful and caring people and want what is best for their children in American schools.

Another volunteer similarly noted the relationship she formed with the family and then questioned existing stereotypes, noting, "[w]hen I was working with the family I did not once see a "drunk" or "lazy" person anywhere in the household. Instead, I saw a family who migrated to the United States in order to support a family and provide a decent education for their children."

Discussion

The *Libros* project demonstrates a variety of ways in which the children of Spanish-speaking migrant farmworking children are engaged in literacy. Literacy engagement is referred to in the literature as consisting of student motivation, learning strategies, affirmation of students' identity, choice of text, and access to books. Indeed, these areas appeared to be evident in the *Libros*

de Familia project. In the first area, student motivation, findings from this preliminary study showed that the children anticipated the weekly arrival of the *Libros* volunteer and willingly selected books, and made suggestions for future books. The second area, learning strategies, according to Cummins (in press), consists of scaffolding meaning and extending students' awareness of language and social interactions. This was evident in the *Libros* project with the children's recognition, as emergent bilinguals, of the relationship between the L1 and L2. The *Libros* project also built relationships between the children and the student volunteers. This was a crucial element to literacy engagement for this population.

Related to this was the third area of literacy engagement in which the children's identity was affirmed (Auerbach, 1996; Cummins, in press). In the *Libros* project, children's identities as Spanish-dominant, bilingual migrants in north Florida, were affirmed by the volunteers. The volunteers frequently selected books that reflected the life experiences and linguistic and cultural background of the children. Cummins notes that "through positive and culturally social interactions, students become engaged in their own learning" (p. xx). Auerbach (1996) further states that "learners become proficient to the extent that instruction is connected to their background knowledge, life experiences, and communicative purposes" (p. 10). Initial findings reveal that to be the case with the seven children in this study. For example, the effort made by the volunteers to connect reading materials with the children's background was evident by use of the interviews and the subsequent books that they selected. The volunteers connected reading material and new vocabulary to the language and cultural background of the children. This was a cornerstone of the *Libros* project and a strategy used by the volunteers.

The fourth area, choice of text, was addressed in this project. Volunteers brought a variety of materials to the home each week, and the children were able to make decisions about the text they wished to read. They had the opportunity to continue with the text or choose a different text. Moreover, they often asked the volunteers to allow them to keep the text over a period of weeks or to bring it back the following week if they were interested in re-reading it. Finally, the *Libros* project provided books for children who may typically have nontraditional or limited access to mainstream texts and reading materials (Author, 2008a). The logistics of the project consisted of identifying materials that would ultimately engage the children in reading and bringing those materials to the homes.

The volunteers' experiences presented briefly above underscore the ways in which this home-literacy project, *Libros de Familia*, engaged Spanish-speaking migrant children in reading. However, the findings show that one crucial component was the relationship built between the children and volunteers that essentially accomplished two important things: first, it contributed to the reading engagement as the *Libros* children and the student volunteers interacted in supportive and mutually-beneficial ways; secondly, it allowed prior assumptions about migrant workers and Latinos to be challenged, ruptured, and reformed to reveal a deeper understanding of a population largely voiceless. Ultimately, we believe that human relationship-building was at the heart of literacy engagement in this project and should be considered an additional component of the literacy engagement framework for children from nontraditional backgrounds and who may not have access to literacies

considered mainstream.

Conclusion

Literacy engagement, which consists of access to books, choice of text, teaching strategies, identity affirmation, and student motivation, considers how reading (and subsequently reading achievement) may be increased for students. In this paper we discuss literacy engagement in the context of a home literacy project, *Libros de Familia*, in which university volunteers provide reading materials and engage in reading with migrant, Spanish speaking children in the community. Findings from this study, which investigated the ways in which literacy engagement was enacted with seven bilingual children, reveal that the volunteers provided access, choice, strategies, and affirmation of students. However, two additional findings became salient: first, the younger children showed signs of emergent literacy development through the ability to compare and contrast across Spanish and English; secondly, a “human relationship” factor, in which volunteers and children built symbiotic relationships, emerged as being crucial to literacy engagement overall. Thus, literacy engagement for children from nontraditional backgrounds who may not have access to mainstream literacies should include this crucial element. Ultimately, we believe that affirming, human connections underlie educational success for nontraditional students and hold the potential for increased educational attainment.

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