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## Deconstructing “Otherness” Through Conversations and Writing in a Biliteracy Classroom: A Book Project Approach to Building Diverse Communities of Learners

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**Abstract:** Framed in the holistic bilingual perspective that considers the entirety of students’ linguistic knowledge, this paper describes the interactions that took place when a third-grade Spanish/English dual language classroom participated in a biliteracy book project. The project began with a literacy teacher’s growing awareness of her students’ language of “otherness” as they referenced one another. To disrupt the students’ constructions of “otherness,” the teacher developed and implemented a plan to engage the children in a book project that emphasized daily conversations about bilingualism and biliteracy, high levels of student participation in decision-making, and an opening up of the language space to value the whole bilingual child. Steps of the project are included, and the voices of the children in their dual language environment captured the intersection of purposeful discussions, written expression, the visual arts, and technology. Although biliteracy was the cornerstone of instruction in this setting, the biliteracy book project approach is relevant to all classrooms seeking to create environments where diversity is explored and celebrated, while communities of learners flourish.

**Keywords:** biliteracy, bilingual learners, dual language learners, biliteracy book project



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**M**y experiences as a reading teacher in a dual language program gave me the opportunity to discover the ways that literacy development and language acquisition merged in young bilingual learners. The students in my reading groups were in kindergarten through third grade in our school's Spanish/English dual language program. One of the primary tenets of this type of program is the deliberate inclusion of children from both home language groups. The aim is to foster bilingualism and biliteracy skills that enable "bilingual learners to use reading, writing, listening, and speaking for a wide range of purposes in two languages" (Beeman & Urow, 2013, p. 2).

Important to this goal are the peer relationships and language modeling that happen as children work and play together (Kibler, Salerno, & Hardigree, 2013; Martin-Beltran, Daniel, Peercy, & Silverman, 2013). I learned that it was often the observations and interactions of my students outside of the classroom that guided and perhaps transformed my practices as I planned and implemented literacy instruction within the classroom. This was certainly the case when the idea for a biliteracy book project was born.

It began one early December afternoon when I met my third-grade students as we made our way to the classroom after lunch recess. There were often playground stories to share and skirmishes to resolve as we headed down the hallway to begin the second half of the day. On this particular occasion, three students approached me.

"The Spanish-speakers wouldn't share the ball," Kevin and Mario (pseudonyms) said in unison, as they each gestured in the direction of Edgar who was walking toward the group collecting around me. Moving the bystanders to their classrooms, I guided Edgar and the two others to a quiet corner. I contemplated why these students, who have shared

a classroom since kindergarten, frequently referred to each other, not by name, but by a designation of their home language. How could I begin to deepen the conversation about who they were as individuals within a larger, diverse bilingual learning community?

"We are a classroom where we are *all* learners of both Spanish and English," I improvised hastily. "On the playground, all are invited to play—girls, boys, second graders, third graders, new students—everyone." I attempted to offer a perspective that would move the students beyond identifying each other through an "us" and "them" lens. Wanting to get started on our afternoon writing time, I announced, "Now let's get to the classroom. There's work to be done." Undoubtedly, my words fell short, and the students were relieved to be moving on with their day.

As I reflected on the recess event, I wondered why the children were referring to each other using words that focused on their classmates' home language. Most bothersome to me about this language of "otherness" was that it was happening in situations of conflict with negative connotations attached. This was problematic because language learning is a socially mediated process that is dependent on a positive, non-threatening environment (Krashen, 2003), and the students disassociating with their peers based on linguistic differences was contradictory to our aim of building bilingual and biliterate identities.

Weis (2003) describes the concept of "otherness" as a referencing of identity characteristics in which negative or less valued perceptions are likely attached. Some scholars suggest that "otherness" is a construct of education that benefits certain groups of students (Mengstie, 2011; Moll, 2001). More specifically, in past and recent history, bilingual education has been fraught with deficit perspectives

(Valencia, 1997) and monolingual paradigms (Wright, 2015). These perspectives cast a light of “otherness” and inferiority on a large and growing number of students, and they have deleterious effects on children and their families. Moll (2001) states,

It [the stratification of children] influences children’s attitudes toward their knowledge and personal competence...It creates the impression that someone else, not they, possesses knowledge and expertise, so that they, including their families, must be unskilled and incompetent. The superiority of the other, and one’s own inferiority, is “naturalized,” becoming part of an ideology that is easily internalized. (p. 13)

Moll (2001) reminds us that the “us” and “them” mentality exists in a much grander sociocultural and political context that seeps its way into U.S. classrooms. It shows itself in culturally and linguistically diverse settings where differences are named. For example, in dual language settings, it is common to hear language binaries such as “English-speaking/Spanish-speaking,” “bilingual/monolingual,” “first language/second language,” and “English proficient/limited English proficient.”

Some of these words that teachers and other adults use may be useful in structuring programs but inaccurate when applied specifically to children. It’s conceivable that when this type of either/or language is used daily, children will begin to see themselves and others in relation to these binary terms. Thus, it is not surprising that a language dichotomy gains speed, and phrases like “The Spanish-speakers wouldn’t share the ball” become normalized language in a school environment. The divide created forces students into categories that overlook and undervalue the whole bilingual child.

I wondered how differences in our third-grade classroom could be seen as positive and emphasized in ways that affirmed identities and fostered understandings of one another. I wanted to actively involve children in conversations that would counter the language and perceptions of “otherness” that had emerged in our third-grade environment. I immediately thought about a community-building book project that I learned about through a colleague who taught second grade in a neighboring school district. My colleague worked with her students and the art specialist to publish a book that celebrated diversity and building new friendships. It was the second graders and their teachers who inspired me to propose a similar idea to my class.

This article describes how I guided a group of third graders in their creation of a biliteracy book project. I begin by offering a context from which the language of “otherness” occurred, and I illustrate the types of conversations that framed our classroom work on similarities and differences. From there, I detail important steps in the writing process and discuss essential elements in the framing of a biliteracy book project that holds language, culture, and diversity central in building understandings of others.

### **School Structures and the Perpetuation of “Otherness”**

For many years, our Midwestern public school implemented a two-way dual language model that utilized both Spanish and English as the language of instruction throughout each day. As part of this model, students were separated by home language during the 90-minute literacy block in kindergarten through second grade. By third grade a transitioning process included time spent on literacy development in both languages. This type of program is based on a belief that students should first develop literacy skills in their home language and then transition to

formal literacy instruction in their second language (Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindholm-Leary, & Rogers, 2007).

As the literacy specialist for the dual language program, I worked with the third-grade students on English literacy development, while their homeroom teacher focused on the Spanish literacy component. Every day the students had an hour each of both Spanish and English literacy. As a Spanish language learner, I was also able to provide support across the languages, and it was my regular practice to use my understanding of Spanish as a resource for English language and literacy development (Beeman & Urow, 2013).

Even as a second language literacy block was introduced, however, the structure of the district's bilingual program was set-up in a way that continued to segregate children by language group. It was reasoned that, because children were experiencing formal literacy in their second language for the first time, there would be a need to differentiate text complexity, word analysis instruction, vocabulary development, and comprehension tasks. This approach was influenced by early models of dual language programs that endorsed a rigid separation of the two languages used for instruction (Wright, 2015).

From this separatist perspective, it is assumed, based on language proficiency, that the strategies used with one group of students would not be appropriate or as effective with those used with the other group. I have learned that this is often the case for students who are recent arrivals to U.S. school systems, but the majority of children identified as English language learners in today's classrooms have been simultaneously exposed to both English and Spanish for the greater part of their early years. Hence, the argument for segregating students has

been contested in the past decade. Wright (2015), reporting on the work of Sayer (2008), states,

This practice [segregating students by home language] has received more and more criticism, because it does not reflect how languages are used in real life, it does not take advantage of the two linguistic systems for social or academic purposes, and it does not affirm students' identities. (p. 101)

It was problematic to our team that students were still socially and academically segregated during their literacy instruction. We felt this splitting of students by language groups created a stratified environment where peer mentoring and cross-cultural exchanges were absent. As the book project idea emerged, my colleagues and I were already in conversation about methods that would shift us from a monolingual view of language to a more holistic perspective of bilingualism that purposefully and strategically brings both languages together and recognizes the power of peer language models (Escamilla et al., 2014).

Our students had been schooled in an environment where their experience of being bilingual meant that they were separated into groups that were determined by their home language. I suspected that the language structures within our school were greatly influencing the students' perceptions and verbal depictions of each other. As I thought more about the language of "otherness" that the children were using (i.e., "Spanish-speaker/English-speaker"), I considered ways that I could offer my students an opportunity to talk about their bilingualism. I decided to set about this shift in language pedagogy by providing children an opportunity to explore their classroom community through writing.

## Classroom Conversations

I addressed the recess event with the entire class the next day during our daily writing time. We shared a conversation about positive behavior and recess rules, and I engaged students in a role-playing activity that suggested strategies for conflict resolution. It was through these afternoon sessions that I was able to move our conversation towards my observations of how students were referring to each other. I asked, “Who in this classroom speaks English?” “Who in this classroom speaks Spanish?” All of the children raised their hand to identify as an English-speaker, and only about two-thirds of the class identified as Spanish-speakers.

I expected this response, as I was aware of the prominence that the mainstream (English) language had in the lives of all my students. In U.S. culture, English is the dominant language outside of our school walls, and therefore carries the greater status in society (Beeman & Urow, 2013). For children from both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking homes, English is omnipresent. For children who are learning Spanish in school only, their exposure to Spanish is much more limited, and their identities as Spanish-speakers/bilingual learners is slower to develop. This further prompted me to explore the concept of *bilingualism* with my students.

I had the students work in groups of three to create a definition for the term *bilingual*. Groups shared their ideas. One of the students commented, “In second grade I learned that *bilingual* means speaking two languages.” Another student added that being bilingual meant that the class did their work in Spanish and English. Others added comments about opportunities to make friends, travel to other countries, and “have jobs where they

could speak both of their languages.” I joined the students’ responses with my reflection that being in a dual language classroom meant that we were all speakers of Spanish, and we were all speakers of English, which meant we were bilingual learners. I added, “So referring to one of your classmates as just a ‘Spanish-speaker’ or ‘English-speaker’ doesn’t tell the whole picture, does it?”

The following day, I brought a book to share with the students that was created by a second-grade classroom in a nearby school district<sup>1</sup>. This book was the result of a collaborative effort between the teachers of the school and their art specialist. Their shared goal was to build a community bilingual and biliterate identity based on excellence within their school.

The book I shared is titled *Somos diferentes y aún así nos parecemos: We are alike and different*. It is a collection of student writing that explored differences and similarities between friends in a second-grade classroom. The student-authors each wrote about a classmate based on a pre-writing interview. The pages were filled with descriptive narratives of the students’ explorations of who their partners were relative to themselves. Accompanying the writings were vibrant portraits that the children created of their partners while working under the guidance of the art teacher. A software program was used to organize and compile the students’ work in a hardcover finished product.

I explained to the students that the authors of the book were students who were also learning in two languages, and I asked, “What do you notice about the book?” Lia offered, “There’s a picture of the students on the back of the book.” Ethan questioned, “How did they get the drawings on the

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<sup>1</sup> A tremendous thank you is offered to both Stili Klikizos (second-grade teacher), and Sue Pezanoski Browne (art specialist) of the Milwaukee Public Schools for sharing

their mentor biliteracy book project idea with our classroom.

cover?” Other students commented on the illustrations and how the authors/illustrators did a “good job.” This was quickly followed by a unanimous, “Can we make one?” The students and I were inspired to create a similar book project. They were excited about the prospects of becoming authors, and I wanted to develop a project that focused on building bilingual identities and countering the perception of “otherness.”

### **The Project**

The students were immediately intrigued with the idea of becoming authors and illustrators of a “real” hardcover book, and we all agreed that creating a book project exploring similarities and differences was a fit for our classroom. I explained to the students that, even though the second graders’ book was offered to us as a mentor text that inspired an idea, our book would have original thoughts unique to our classroom. Because we were finishing the last few weeks before the holiday break, the homeroom teacher and I decided to begin the project when school resumed in January of that year.

### **Fostering a Dynamic and Fluid Language Environment**

As I prepared with the homeroom teacher, we determined that each writing session would begin with a conversation that would help us focus on students’ perceptions of each other and incidences such as the soccer event that occurred on the playground. González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) suggest that these frequent and purposeful conversations create language and cultural connections between students’ lives and the learning experiences in which they are immersed.

In addition, our holistic bilingual perspective provided us with the framework to conceptualize our writing environment as a dynamic and fluid language space (García & Wei, 2014). This space, we

envisioned, would recognize that bilingual learners use the entirety of their linguistic repertoires to create new ideas, moving us away from a rigid separation of languages that might potentially hinder biliteracy development (Bauer & Gort, 2012). We decided that, during our writing sessions, whole group instruction by the teachers would be alternated in Spanish and English daily, but we would encourage students to explore both languages when they were engaged in small group and partner interactions.

During our first January session, I began with a conversation prompt that would open up dialogue about how we identified as speakers of two languages. I posed questions for the students to talk about in small groups. The questions I gave them were, “¿Cuándo usted habla español?” “¿Cuándo usted habla inglés?” [When do you speak Spanish? When do you speak English?]. On this particular day, I had the students use their writing notebooks to respond using the sentence frame, “Hablo español cuando...” [I speak Spanish when...]. Then I had them share their responses. As I moved through the groups I heard Lia say, “Hablo español with mi mamá y mi papá, and English with my brothers.” Ryan told Ana, “I’m the first one in my family to learn Spanish.” Ana replied, “You’re the first one to be bilingual.” It was clear that there was tremendous variance in bilingual identities in the classroom.

Our classroom mirrored the heterogeneous nature of dual language classrooms in the U.S. The Spanish-speaking students represented many Latino heritages throughout Mexico, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico. There were varying degrees of language proficiency based on generational status (first, second, third generation immigrants), home language use, and the language of prior instruction. Hence, there was a large spectrum of literacy knowledge in the languages of each child. In addition, in this dual

language program, almost one-third of the class was learning Spanish for the first time. Language use in our classroom community was dynamic and in constant flux as children developed as bilingual, biliterate learners.

In this first conversation, I asked the students, “How do you think we should present our two languages in our book project?” Kevin referred to the book created by the second-grade class and suggested that they choose the language to write in, just as the second graders did. Some students immediately wanted to write in their more comfortable first language, and others seemed enthusiastic about writing in their developing second language.

I was uncertain about opening up the language space, because I was afraid that most of the students would default to English. On the other hand, I wanted to explore the idea of my students as holistic bilinguals. My uncertainties began to dissolve when I saw students naturally crossing from their home language to their second language. We encouraged students to use dictionaries, thesauruses, and, most importantly, each other as they moved through the creative process.

The next day I assigned partners. My rationale for choosing the partnerships was to consider the value of peer mentors and create cross-linguistic and cross-cultural experiences (García & Wei, 2014). I made deliberate decisions to traverse gender, language, ethnicity, and ability lines in the pairings. I created a framework and timeline for the book project (see Appendix A), and I proposed to the students that they gather information on their partners through an interview process similar to that of a reporter. They unanimously agreed.

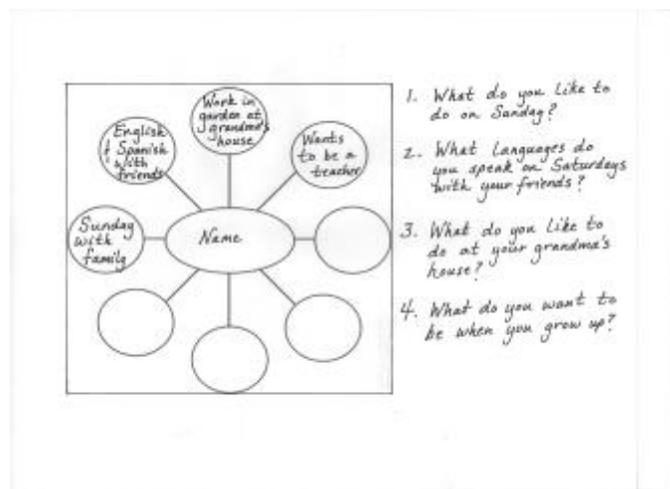


Figure 1. Web organizer for interview questions

### The Interview

I provided the students with a pre-writing web organizer to help them develop a series of interview questions. Using the document camera, I modeled the process by having the students ask me questions. I wrote my name in the center circle of the web. I gave an example of the type of question that could be asked: “What do you like to do on Sunday?” I answered, “On Sunday I like to spend time with my family.” Then, in one of the smaller circles, I wrote, “Sunday with family” [See Figure 1].

I reminded the students that, if I asked really interesting questions, I would get fascinating answers to help me write. I encouraged the students to think beyond the common questions of favorite color, animal, and food and to think of interesting ways to gather their information. I offered another example: “What language(s) do you speak on Saturday with your friends?” I wrote “English & Spanish with friends” in one of the circles.

I had the students turn and talk to a partner to come up with some practice questions. We then continued to fill in my circles with the students’

ideas. Karla suggested, “Instead of asking what she<sup>2</sup> [her partner] likes to do, I could ask her what she likes to do with her grandma when she goes to her house.” Samuel added, “We could find out what they want to be when they grow up.” We used the four questions shown in Figure 1 as the model for the interview questions and responses. I encouraged the students to use the model for ideas but suggested that creating their own questions would make each one of the interviews unique. The class agreed that 7-10 questions would give them enough information to write about their partner, and they could add more circles to their template if needed.

Throughout the following week, the students were busy creating questions, interviewing their partners, and filling in their circles using three guidelines that I provided on chart paper:

1. Working independently, create 7-10 questions to ask your partner. Write your questions in your writing journal.
2. Complete a brief conference with a teacher to share your questions (could be any support adults in the classroom).
3. Interview your partner and record your notes in the circles on the graphic organizer.

Although many of the questions were about “favorite things,” I prompted the students to learn more about their partners. For example, as Mario prepared questions for Ethan, he included inquiries about favorite food, sports teams, and animals. He brought his questions to me, and I asked him how he might learn more about Ethan’s family and background. I challenged him to write two more questions that explored these dimensions of his

classmate. Ten minutes later he showed me the additional questions he anticipated asking Ethan:

- “What cultures do you have?”
- “Is it fun?”

Mario later wrote, “Ethan and I both get food after school like McDonald’s. Ethan has a lot of cultures. I have a little. Ethan has dances. I do not. Ethan and I are best friends.”

The students’ interactions provided me with a window into their understanding of concepts such as *culture* and *bilingualism* that guided me in our pre-writing conversations. Mario’s notion that Ethan had a lot of cultures and he had little prompted me to make connections to the social studies lesson on cultures around the world and the idea that we all are a part of a culture(s). In one session, we looked at the social studies text, and I paraphrased the definition of culture as “a set of shared beliefs, customs, attitudes, and values of a group of people.” I also pointed out to the children that many of us come from homes where more than one language or culture is celebrated (i.e., Ethan having “a lot of cultures”).

As third graders, they were interested in how their own favorites compared to others, yet they also had the ability to begin discovering new things about their partners. I noticed that the students’ questions were made up of two distinct categories. One category focused on favorites and interests, and the other emphasized family, culture, and language.

Although many topics were shared, each student had a unique set of questions to begin his/her

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I will use “he” to refer to individuals who identify as male, “she”

to refer to individuals who identify as female, and “ze” for individuals who identify as gender neutral. I have selected these pronouns because I believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

interview. (See Appendix B for a sample of the types of interview questions the students created.)

### Analyzing the Interviews

Once the students completed their interviews, I led them in a discussion of what it means to analyze the responses they collected. I wrote the word *analysis* on the front board. I asked the students to talk to each other about what it means to analyze something. After a few minutes of partner talk, we came back together as a group. One of the students said, “When you analyze words, you sort them in patterns.” His answer reflected a connection to a phrase I often used—“word analysis”—to describe our engagement in word studies, such as word sorts.

I opened the class dictionary and read, “Analysis...A careful study of something to learn about its parts, what they do, and how they are related to each other” (Geddes & Grosset, 2010). I explained to the students that analyzing their interviews meant that

they would look at the questions (parts) and think about how their partners’ responses could be developed into an essay about similarities and differences they had with each other. In order to do this, I suggested that they look at the graphic organizing tools in their writing notebooks.

The students’ writing notebooks were filled with a variety of organizing tools that included Venn diagrams, t-charts, and different web visuals. Since the students were comfortable and familiar with the various tools, I left the choice of analysis up to each of them. I suggested that the Venn diagram would be a useful tool in visualizing what the partners had in common and what they did not. I also modeled how to use a t-chart. I used my responses from the sample in Figure 1, and I wrote my name as a heading on the left side of the t-chart. Underneath the heading, I listed my responses as they were written in the web. Then, as an example, I asked Mario the same four questions and added his responses to the right side of the t-chart under his name heading [see Figure 2].

**T Chart**

Mrs. E.	Mario
- Sunday with family	- Sunday with family
- English and Spanish with friends	- English and Spanish with friends, but mostly English
- Work in the garden at Grandma's house	- Play games and Cook at Grandma's house
- Wants to be a teacher	- Wants to be a soccer player

Figure 2. Sample of analysis using a t-chart

One of the students suggested making a star by each of the partner statements that “matched.” Another student wanted to use two different color highlighters: one color for similarities and one for differences. If the students chose to analyze the interview responses using the t-chart, I asked that they mark the similarities and difference using their choice of methods (i.e., stars, circles, different colors). On my sample t-chart, I chose to circle the similar statements as another option of how it could be done.

This was the part of the project that I hoped would help the students develop an understanding of the many dimensions of their partner. Throughout the analysis, the students were engaged in independent writing, individual conferences with both teachers,

and the option to meet with their partners to clarify the information with which they were working.

During one analysis session, I observed Ana and Kevin laughing heartily as they worked at a table in the back of the room. Checking to see that they were on task, I walked over to them. “How’s the analysis coming?” I asked. Looking at her chart, Ana explained, “We both have a sister, but Kevin likes to bug his sister. I don’t like to bug my sister. He is way funnier than me... clumsier too.” Kevin protested lightheartedly. I smiled, thinking this is all part of being a third grader. I noticed that Ana used her t-chart with the headings “Same” and “Different,” rather than use their names as the column headings. Under the “Same” column she wrote:

- Both in Room 41
- Likes worms
- Likes Team Mexico
- Halloween is favorite holiday
- Likes fishing
- Likes animals
- Both have fun

In the other column, Ana identified qualities that distinguished her from Kevin. She recorded:

- Kevin is a boy. I’m a girl.
- His family was born in Texas. My family was born in Mexico.
- Kevin is tall. I am almost his height.
- He is clumsy. I am not clumsy.
- Bugs his sister. I don’t bug my sister.

It was apparent to me that Ana and Kevin enjoyed the process of learning about each other. I watched them and the others discover their partners as they crossed the invisible lines of gender, language, culture, ability, personality, and interest. After weeks of dialogue, data collection, and analysis, the

students were ready to begin composing their essays.

### **Preparation for the Final Writing Phase**

In preparation for the final writing phase, we took a few afternoon sessions to discuss the formatting and publishing process. Although I found many book publishing formats online, I chose to use the publishing program that was available on our classroom Mac computers. The publishing program was a part of the iPhoto keepsake options.

There were several themed layout choices, and the homeroom teacher and I decided on the “Picture Book” theme, because it offered ample space for the amount of text we expected we would need for each of the student essays. This theme also provided a page layout that allowed us to scan the student illustrations on one half of each page, leaving the other half for the text. I projected an example of the book page on the Smartboard screen to show the students how their work would eventually be laid out.

We looked at the options for font style and background colors for the space on the page that would hold the text. As a class, we chose the Helvetica font option because we felt it was the easiest to read. There were 10 options for background colors. The students were excited about being able to plan for and choose the background color for the page that would hold the portraits and writings they would create. There was a new buzz in the classroom as students realized they were a step closer to the final project.

### **Writing the Essays**

To address writing the essays, I began including explicit teaching of the writing process in our morning literacy periods using a mini-lesson format. The afternoon sessions remained a time when

students engaged in the actual writing process.

Topics in the morning mini-lessons included:

- Writing the introduction
- Keeping your voice in writing
- Purpose and topic focus
- Flow and organization of writing
- Word choice and rich, colorful language
- The concluding sentence(s)
- Conventions of writing and editing

The writing process that we used for our biliteracy book project was one with which the students were already familiar. We followed our adaptation of a three-draft process outlined for developing writers by Cunningham, Cunningham, Hall, & Moore (2005). Our classroom writing process included the four steps outlined below:

1. Draft of writing plan
  - Use writing organizer to draft a plan
  - Discuss plan with writing partner
2. First draft
  - Self-edit
  - Partner edit
  - Teacher check
3. Revision 1
  - Self-edit
  - Teacher conference
4. Revision 2
  - Partner share
  - Teacher share
  - Publish/Present

This final writing phase remained a dynamic process through which the students continued to interact and analyze the ideas they were forming. One afternoon, I noticed Jonathan had moved from his desk to talk to his partner, Jasmin. I looked at his writing notebook. He had written, “Cuando fuimos

jóvenes los dos vivimos en México” [When we were young we both lived in Mexico]. Returning from Jasmin’s desk, he quickly erased the period at the end of his sentence and expanded his idea, “...pero a mí me gusta viajar a México, y a ella, Francia” [...but I like to visit Mexico, and her, France].

Afternoon writing sessions were filled with peer editing, teacher conferences and revising sessions. The students reported their steps on a chart that I created to monitor progress at-a-glance. The students chose the language they used. To support both languages in the writing process, the homeroom teacher conferenced in Spanish at a table set up with Spanish dictionaries and thesauruses. I developed a similar conference set-up for English writing support. I noted that, of the 23 children in the classroom, 9 wrote in Spanish, and 13 wrote in English.

One student, Lisabeth, used both Spanish and English in her writing. Upon sharing her finished product with me, I asked Lisabeth about her choice to use both of her languages. She smiled, “I didn’t even know I did that.” This is Lisabeth’s contribution to the book:

Melanie y yo somos diferentes e iguales en muchas maneras. La primera manera es a mí y a Melanie nos gusta la leche y la soda. La segunda manera es a las dos nos gustan las enchiladas. Yo y ella vemos “Wizards of Waverly Place.” A mí y a Melanie nos gusta leer, y la ultima cosa es que a nosotras nos gustan unos carros chidos. Now I’m going to tell you how Melanie and I are different. The first thing is that she has only gone on two trips, and I’ve gone on more. She has a DS and I don’t. She has only one pet, and I have more. She likes Sleeping Beauty, and I don’t. We usually have the same amount of friends. This is how Melanie and I are different and

the same [Translation of first part: Melanie and I are different and the same in many ways. The first way is Melanie and I like milk and soda. The second way is that we both like enchiladas. She and I watch “Wizards of Waverly Place.” Melanie and I like to read, and the last thing is that we both like cool cars.].

Lisabeth’s writing made me realize how significant it was to purposefully cultivate the bilingual identities of the students, and, as I look back at this, I continue to learn how important it is for students to be viewed as active participants in this process.

### Connecting Art and Writing

During the weeks we engaged in the writing process, the students worked with the art teacher in art class to create a portrait of their partners. The art teacher, Mr. H., was aware of my objective of having students learn about their classmates to influence the language of “otherness” that I observed. Mr. H. began the first illustration session by talking about the distinct features of each student. He used terminology specific to art class, words such as *line*, *shading*, *composition*, *contour*, *foreground*, *background*, and *perspective*. Before even beginning to work with materials, Mr. H. had the students sit



Figure 3. Cover of the class book project



Figure 4. Rosana’s illustration for the back cover

across from their partners to explore their faces. He asked, “What makes your partner unique?” He then had the students close their eyes and think about the features of their partner that were most memorable.

I remember feeling that this closer look was significant in the exploration of who their classmates were. Students described hair length and color, eye shape, lines, and shadows they noticed on each other. Mr. H. remarked that they would have four art sessions in which to finish the illustration. He modeled how to begin sketching the shape of the face, and he gave tips about how to accurately represent the proportions of a human body.

Throughout the sessions that followed, the students’ work moved from erasure-shaded pencil drawings to colorful, textured, human figures with obvious foreground and background distinctions. The portraits were detailed, and the students heeded Mr. H.’s instructions about not leaving any space uncolored. I enlisted his expertise in choosing portraits that would be used for a collage on the

book cover and would be representative of the diversity in our classroom [see Figure 3].

One morning before the start of school, I looked up from my desk to see Rosana excitedly coming through my classroom door. “I made something for our book!” she said as she handed me a picture created with a mixture of crayons, colored pencils, and markers. It was an illustration of the world with children and adults standing on top, holding hands. Stars covered the sky with a bright celestial body partially showing at the top. Across the sky she had written, “We are different and the same! ¡Somos diferentes y iguales!” It was the perfect illustration for the back cover of the book [see Figure 4].

Each illustration for the book was unique and was a magnificent representation of the text that it accompanied. The collaborative and cross-disciplinary approach used to complete the illustrations supported the students in their desire to create their very best work.

### Sharing Our Book

Three weeks later, the books were in our hands. We couldn’t wait to share them with others. Using funds donated to us by a community organization, we were able to purchase six hard copies of the book. Two of the copies were designated to stay in the classroom for in-class reading. The other four books were given to the librarian to be available for checkout. The librarian created a schedule that would ensure that all children had an opportunity to receive the book to share with their families before the end of the school year.

I also printed colorful paper copies of the book so that the students had a memento of their third-grade year and a reminder of our exploration of similarities and differences in our classroom community. We used this copy when we went to

visit our kindergarten buddies for our Monday reading buddy session. The third graders were proud to share their book, and the younger children loved it so much that the kindergarten teachers decided to have the children create a friendship book. The kindergarten book was classroom published using the school’s spiral binding machine. It was filled with wonderful emergent writing pieces about friendships in kindergarten.

In one of our final weeks of school, we also had the opportunity to share our book project through a multimedia presentation at the end-of-the-year assembly. We projected our book pages on the large screen in the gym/auditorium as we played audio-recordings of the children reading their essays. I was able to introduce our project and provide a description of our journey as a classroom community. We discussed that sharing our book could impact the ways in which children treated others and we hoped our book would become a mentor text for other classrooms.

### Our Book Project Celebration

As a class, we celebrated the publishing of our book, *Somos Diferentes, Somos Iguales: We Are Different, We Are the Same*, on a late spring Friday afternoon. I reminded the students of where we started at the beginning of the year and how much we all had grown and learned about each other. As we celebrated, we read the book together. The students shared their work, connecting their own voices to the text and portraits. Rosana began [see Figure 5]:

Adrian y yo somos diferentes y los mismos.  
El amigo favorito de Adrian es Jonathan y el mío es Diana. El festivo que le gusta a Adrian es Navidad, como el mío. Cuando Adrian crece él quiere ser músico y yo quiero ser doctora. Adrian habla inglés en su casa, y también español. En mi casa, hablo español y

inglés. Adrian nació en febrero y yo nació en diciembre. Adrian y yo nos gusta la pizza de peperoni. Adrian le gustan los mustangs como yo. Un día él quiere vivir en México con su familia. Yo también quisiera. Y esas son las cosas que son diferentes e iguales [Adrian and I are different and alike. Adrian's favorite friend is Jonathan, and mine is Diana. The celebration that Adrian likes is Christmas, like me. When Adrian grows up he wants to be a musician and I want to be a doctor. Adrian speaks English at home, and Spanish also. In my home, I speak Spanish and English. Adrian was born in February and I was born in December. Adrian and I like pepperoni pizza. Adrian likes mustangs like me. One day he wants to live in Mexico with his family. I also wish that. These are the things that are different and the same.].

We savored each page as we continued through the book, and when we got to the final page, I didn't want it to end. I invited Ryan to read what he wrote [see Figure 6]:

**Carmen**  
by Ryan

Carmen and I are alike, but different too. One difference is that Carmen has long hair, and I have short hair. Now here is what we have in common. We both have English and Spanish cultures. This is something unique. We both like to try new things. She has seven people in her family, and I only have five. This is one where it is an alike thing. We both like math. A difference is that she likes the book *Danny and the Dinosaur*, and I like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. We both like sports, but her favorite is soccer and mine is hockey. Carmen's parents were born in Mexico. My parents were born in the USA. Another thing we have in common is we both celebrate Christian stuff. That is how Carmen and I are alike, but different.



Figure 6. "Carmen" by Ryan

Carmen and I are alike, but different too. One difference is that Carmen has long hair, and I have short hair. Now here is what we have in common. We both have English and Spanish cultures. This is something unique. We both like to try new things. She has seven people in her family, and I only have five. This is one where it is an alike thing. We both like math. A difference is that she likes the book *Danny and the Dinosaur*, and I like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. We both like sports, but her favorite is soccer and mine is hockey. Carmen's parents were born in Mexico. My parents were born in the USA. Another thing we have in common is we both celebrate Christian stuff. That is how Carmen and I are alike, but different.

**Adrian**  
por Rosana

Adrian y yo somos diferentes y los mismos. El amigo favorito de Adrian es Jonathan y el mio es Diana. El festivo que le gusta a Adrian es Navidad como el mio. Cuando Adrian crece él quiere ser músico y yo quiero ser doctora. Adrian habla inglés en su casa, y también español. En mi casa, hablo español y inglés. Adrian nació en febrero y yo nació en diciembre. Adrian y yo nos gusta la pizza de peperoni. A Adrian le gustan los mustangs como yo. Un día él quiere vivir en México con su familia. Yo también quisiera. Y esas son las cosas que son diferentes e iguales.



Figure 5. "Adrian" by Rosana

Upon finishing, I took a few moments to remind the students of our early discussions about who we were as a bilingual classroom community. Although it was difficult to measure just how much the project influenced dispositions, I told the students that I noticed a change in the way that they spoke about and to each other. There were still conflicts, but the problem solving was now a bit different. The difference was a shared understanding of who we

**Melanie**

por Lisabeth

Melanie y yo somos diferentes e iguales en muchas maneras. La primera manera es a mi y a Melanie nos gusta la leche y la soda. La segunda manera es a las dos nos gustan las enchiladas. Yo y ella vemos Wizard's of Waverly Place. A mi y a Melanie nos gusta leer, y la última cosa es que a nosotras nos gustan unos carros chidos. Now I'm going to tell you how Melanie and I are different. The first thing is that she has only gone on two trips, and I've gone on more. She has a DS and I don't. She has only one pet, and I have more. She likes Sleeping Beauty, and I don't. We usually have the same amount of friends. This is how Melanie and I are different and the same.



Figure 7. “Melanie” por Lisabeth

were as a classroom—a classroom that talked about differences and similarities, bilingualism, and learning to read and write in two languages.

I’m confident that throughout our time together, the students saw each other in ways that moved them beyond the binary of “Spanish-speaker/English-speaker” to see their common identities as learners of language and literacy. In the end, we had a beautifully bound, colorful, hardcover book filled with exemplary pieces of third-grade writing that, for me, represented much more. The book was a visible, tangible manifestation of the exploration of who the students were in their third-grade dual language classroom (see Figures 7, 8, & 9 for more examples of the book project mentioned in this article).

**The Power of One Project**

Change occurred in this third-grade classroom. Yet, for this change to be sustained and expanded, it is essential that school personnel create a shared vision that specifically addresses school structures and the language of “otherness” that perpetuate inequities and deficit perspectives (Valencia, 1997). When I talk with both pre-service and in-service teachers about my experience, I share the book and

what I have learned. I offer four guidelines that framed our third-grade project. They include:

Teachers and students will...

1. Collaborate to create a book that builds their identities as writers.
2. Have many and varied opportunities to use listening, speaking, reading, and writing in two languages.
3. Engage in a book project process that values diversity and the classroom as a community of learners.
4. Keep equity and respect for others at the forefront while countering deficit perspectives and language of “otherness.”

I have learned that project-based literacy learning is meaningful because of the possibilities for dialogue and social interaction. Planning for purposeful dialogue is an essential practice in linguistically diverse classrooms (Escamilla et al., 2014). It allows for students to hear and rehearse the language needed for meaningful engagement in collaborative tasks. In our case, the aim was to build biliterate identities as we engaged in work that offered an alternative to the perception of “otherness.”

**Ethan**

by Mario

Ethan and I are friends. Ethan and I like the same holidays. We are both boys. I like math and Ethan does not. Ethan has short hair, and I do not. Ethan likes pepperoni pizza, and I do not. Ethan and I both play the same sports. They are football, basketball, and baseball. Ethan and I are from the United States. Ethan and I both get food after school like McDonald's. Ethan has a lot of cultures. I have a little. Ethan has dances. I do not. Ethan and I are best friends.



Figure 8. “Ethan” by Mario

Engaging in a project, such as the biliteracy book project, requires an understanding that the school environment exists in a broader sociocultural, historical, and political context, and there will be topics and issues that affect students' lives. As teachers, we can seek out opportunities to confront biases, present multiple perspectives, and foster positive perceptions of others. The book project suggests to me a re-envisioning of school environments as places where constructions of "otherness" can be disrupted and languages can purposely and effectively overlap, allowing linguistic and cultural identities to flourish. Even though biliteracy was the cornerstone of instruction in this setting, the biliteracy book project approach is relevant to all classrooms seeking to create environments where diversity is explored and celebrated. Planning for and implementing a book project as a way to build understandings is a powerful place to start.

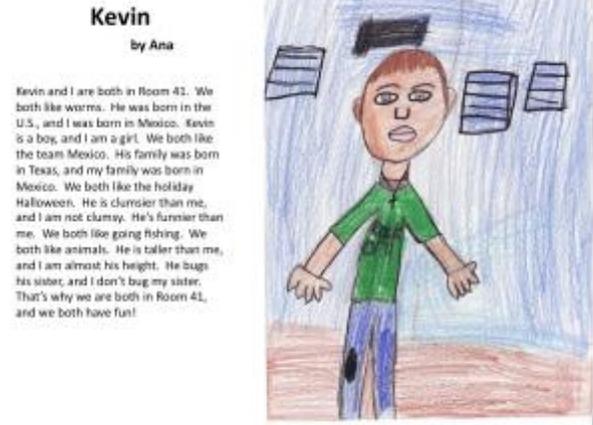


Figure 9. "Kevin" by Ana

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**Appendix A**

**Book Project Framework and Timeline**

Book Project Framework	Timeline
<p>Book project preparation/organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define bilingualism and biliteracy: Classroom activity</li> <li>• Introduce Book Project: Mentor text read-aloud</li> <li>• Discussion of project: Identify project objectives and format</li> </ul>	<p>Week 1</p>
<p>Book Project Language Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-Writing Activity: “¿Cuándo usted habla español/inglés?” [When do you speak Spanish/English?]</li> <li>• Classroom discussion: Determine the language of interactions and writing (“How do we want our languages to be represented?”).</li> <li>• Choose partners: Determine selection process and provide time for students to engage with one another before beginning the project.</li> </ul>	<p>Week 2</p>
<p>Book Project Interview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole group lesson: Modeling the graphic organizer</li> <li>• Student development of questions</li> <li>• Conference with adult</li> <li>• Partner interviews</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 3-4</p>
<p>Book Project Analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define the term <i>analysis</i></li> <li>• Discuss the analysis process</li> <li>• Identify analysis tools (graphic organizers)</li> <li>• Model use of graphic organizers</li> <li>• Independent work analyzing interview questions</li> <li>• Check back with partner if needed</li> <li>• Teacher progress monitoring/guidance as needed</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 5-6</p>
<p>Book Project Writing Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss/describe publishing program</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 7-8</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore layout options</li> <li>• Plan mini-lesson topics</li> <li>• Outline expectations/model writing process (planning, self-edits, peer edits, teacher conference, revise, publish)</li> </ul>	
<p>Book Project Layout/Final Edits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scan illustrations for each page</li> <li>• Students convert essays to word processing text</li> <li>• Choose background color for text space</li> <li>• Write title, dedication, and front/back book flap text</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 9-10</p>
<p>Book Project Illustrations with art teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-plan with art teacher</li> <li>• Pre-drawing activity: Examination of partner's features</li> <li>• Partner drawing</li> <li>• Identify front and back cover illustrations</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 8-10</p>
<p>Book Project Sharing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom celebration</li> <li>• Plan to share with families</li> <li>• Library copies/circulation plan</li> <li>• All-school presentation</li> <li>• Share with kindergarten buddies</li> </ul>	<p>Weeks 11-12</p>

## Appendix B

### Biliteracy Book Project: Sample of Student Interview Topics and Questions

#### Topic

#### Questions

##### Interests/Favorites

- What do you like to do at school?
- Do you have a favorite book?
- What sport do you play in your free time?
- What kind of trip would you like to take?
- What is your favorite movie/television show?
- What pet do you wish you had?
- Do you like toys that are transformers?
- What girls' name do you like?
- What do you like to learn about?
- What do you want to be when you grow up?
- What animals/insects/ do you like?
- What is your favorite season? Why?
- What is your favorite part of the day?
- Do you have a special place?

##### Family/Culture/Language

- Where were you born?
- When were you born?
- Where is your family from?
- Where does your family go on vacation?
- What restaurants does your family go to when it's a special day?
- How many languages are in your family?
- What language do you speak around the house?
- What cultures do you have?
- What holidays do you celebrate in your family?
- Who lives in your house?
- Do you have brothers/sisters?
- What games do you play with your family?
- What do you do with your sister?
- What work does your family do?
- Do you go to church?