



## THIS APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH LEARNERS WORKS BETTER. SO WHY AREN'T WE USING IT MORE?



Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, National Education Policy Center Fellow Kathy Escamilla started noticing that English language learners had changed. In the past, they had arrived at school with little exposure to English because they had been born outside the United States. But increasingly, more and more “emerging bilinguals” (the term often used by experts in the field) were U.S.-born children with experience with English and Spanish alike. This new generation of emerging bilinguals needed a new approach to literacy. Yet schools continued to use instructional methods geared toward monolingual Spanish speakers. (The vast majority of emerging bilinguals in the U.S. speak Spanish.)

That’s where Escamilla and her colleagues stepped in. For more than a decade, they have been developing a new approach called “paired literacy.” As the term suggests, the method introduces Spanish and English simultaneously. By contrast, bilingual education had historically started by focusing on Spanish, with English introduced later on. And most children were not even exposed to that—the majority of emerging bilinguals in this country are taught entirely or almost entirely in English.

In the Q&A below, Escamilla describes how and why paired literacy appears to be a more promising approach than either English-only or Spanish-first instruction.

Escamilla is a professor of education in the area of Educational Equity & Cultural Diversity, in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. She has served two terms as the president of the National Association for Bilingual Education and also chaired the Bilingual SIG for the American Education Research Association (AERA). The paired literacy program she is developing with her colleagues—who are listed below—is called **Literacy**

Squared. Escamilla is the co-author of the book, *Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action*.

**Q: What is the Literacy Squared program?**

**A:** *Literacy Squared is an educational program that has four components, including research, professional development, assessment and instruction.*

*The motto of Literacy Squared is “English sooner and Spanish longer,” to indicate that the teaching of literacy in English begins in kindergarten and so does the teaching of Spanish literacy. Literacy instruction in both languages continues at least through elementary school and hopefully into secondary school. The objective of the program is to nurture and develop bilingualism and biliteracy in Spanish-speaking students in U.S. schools.*

*It is important to note that the project was developed for and has only been researched on Spanish/English emerging bilingual learners.*

*Literacy Squared has been implemented over the past 15 years in five states and 14 different school districts. In addition, professional development relating to Literacy Squared is currently being implemented in a statewide professional development project in Illinois. We estimate that approximately 13,000 children and 600 teachers have been impacted by the project. Almost all of the children in the program are Spanish/English emerging bilingual children in what are currently labeled either late exit transitional bilingual programs and/or one-way dual language programs.*

**Q: How was Literacy Squared created? By whom? Why?**

**A:** *Olivia Ruiz-Figueroa and I created and conceptualized Literacy Squared in 2005. A small team of doctoral students and a group of volunteer school districts assembled in the 2005-2006 school year to conduct pilot studies around the central tenets of the program. These core team members included Susan Hopewell, Sandra Butvilofsky, and Wendy Sparrow, who were all doctoral students at CU Boulder when Literacy Squared began, and who themselves were interested in studying the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in Spanish-speaking children.*

*Literacy Squared was created because the population of Spanish/English emerging bilingual children had changed significantly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 70s through the 90s, the majority of Spanish-speaking children were sequential bilinguals, who entered school clearly dominant in Spanish with little or no English. Today, we see more simultaneous bilinguals, who are born in the U.S. and who had exposure in early childhood to both Spanish and English. Too often, simultaneous Spanish/English bilingual children are seen as having deficits in both of languages. Further, they are frequently exposed to outdated programs geared toward sequential bilinguals. Many questioned whether simultaneous bilingual children could even benefit from bilingual education, arguing instead that they would be better served in English-language programs. Furthermore, the majority of research in the field was conducted on sequential bilingual programs with little attention paid to the growing numbers of simultaneous bilinguals.*

*Our argument was that 21<sup>st</sup> century bilingual learners in the U.S. were different from their predecessors. As a result, they were misunderstood and undervalued. They deserved programs that were created with their needs in mind. The “why” of the development of Literacy Squared was important, as currently 85% of the emerging bilingual learners in US schools are simultaneous bilinguals. Twenty-first century children need 21<sup>st</sup> century programs. Literacy Squared was created for the “new normal.”*

**Q: Based on the research you and your colleagues conducted, what have been the outcomes of Literacy Squared?**

*A: To date, colleagues and doctoral students in the Literacy Squared Project have written and published one book, 13 articles in peer-reviewed journals, nine book chapters, and 18 technical reports. The published research has dealt with a variety of topics related to the Literacy Squared Project including: the efficacy of Literacy Squared; the creation of trajectories toward biliteracy; studies on biliteracy development and the Common Core State Standards; professional development; and the criteria for labeling bilingual students low-achieving. Research has also included studies of strategies specific to Literacy Squared, such as Lotta Lara.*

*Major findings include:*

- 1. It is possible to develop literacy in Spanish and English simultaneously in early elementary grades in ways that accelerate the development of English literacy skills at the same time that Spanish literacy is developed and maintained.*
- 2. Strategies that have been specifically developed for Literacy Squared schools (Lotta Lara and Dictado) enhance literacy/biliteracy development in both languages.*
- 3. Biliterate assessment systems are critical to programs that aspire to develop bilingualism/biliteracy.*
- 4. Biliterate frameworks applied to assessments of emerging bilinguals create different and more positive outcomes of the same data sets than monolingual frameworks.*
- 5. Literacy in Spanish and English can be developed simultaneously in paired literacy programs, provided that teachers offer explicit instruction and pay careful attention to cross-language connections.*

**Q: Are most districts and states appropriately assessing English learners’ literacy skills? Based on your research, how might we do a better job of assessing these skills?**

*A: Most states are not appropriately assessing emerging bilingual children’s literacy skills. The majority of states only test children in English or only in Spanish in the early grades. For the most part, the developers of these high-stakes tests do not even include emerging bilingual students in their norming populations. It should be noted that, in many states, less than half of the native, monolingual English-speaking children are classified as proficient on English literacy tests! The tests are difficult for the targeted population of native English speakers and yet students who are just learning English are expected to compete with and achieve at levels comparable to native monolingual English speakers.*

*Predictably, for at least 20 years, emerging bilingual students have attained lower scores than monolingual English-speaking students on these English language tests. Instead of focusing on the problems inherent to testing emerging bilinguals exclusively on English, many people have instead created a narrative around an “achievement gap.”*

*When state high-stakes tests are only offered in English, school districts have an incentive to emphasize literacy instruction that is also English-centered. This is not to say that district officials agree with the English monolingual assessment systems. They are simply mandated to comply with them. Even when they administer assessments in emerging bilinguals’ native languages, the tests do not get as much attention because they are not typically high stakes.*

*Further, the more that English-only programs indicate that emerging bilingual learners are behind, the more likely school districts are to emphasize English-only tests over biliterate assessments.*

*A second and no less important issue is one relating to the usage of monolingual paradigms in assessment in two languages. In these situations, languages such as Spanish and English may both be assessed. However, the results of these assessments compare emerging bilingual children to monolingual learners in each of the assessed languages. That is, emerging bilingual learners are compared in Spanish to monolingual Spanish learners. In turn, they are compared in English to monolingual English learners. Frequently, the conclusion is that emerging bilinguals are achieving below monolinguals in both of their languages. This parallel monolingual assessment framework is problematic in assessing the unique abilities of emerging bilingual learners.*

*As stated above, it is imperative that we develop, utilize and explore the development of trajectories toward biliteracy from a bilingual viewpoint. In *Literacy Squared*, we propose that the process of becoming biliterate is different than the process of becoming literate in a single language. We argue that biliteracy is a higher form of literacy than monoliteracy.*

**Q: How is Literacy Squared different from the literacy instruction that most English language learners receive in the United States? Why don’t more schools use this kind of approach? What opposition, if any, exists to expanding this approach? What changes, if any, have you observed in the past few years when it comes to the ability of schools to offer paired literacy programs? To what do you attribute any changes you might have observed?**

**A:** *Literacy Squared is very different than the literacy instruction that most English language learners receive in the United States. Most students labeled English Language Learners (I prefer the term emerging bilingual learners) are not in programs where they are progressing toward literacy in two languages. Over 80% of emerging bilingual learners in our country are in English programs that provide no opportunities to learn to read, write, or maintain proficiency in another language. Literacy Squared is also different in that it uses “paired literacy strategies” in which students work on Spanish and English literacy simultaneously, beginning in kindergarten and continuing at least through fifth grade and preferably through the remainder of their years in school. By contrast, even in*

*places that offer instruction that uses a student's native language, most of these bilingual programs in the U.S. are sequential in nature. They develop literacy in a non-English language first, followed by literacy development in English. The majority are also transitional in that they use Spanish literacy for a short period of time and then transition children into English-only instruction. Literacy Squared explicitly uses strategies to help children engage in cross-language connections. Finally, the program does not demand the strict separation of languages that is required in some dual language programs.*

*Over the past few years, we have seen growing interest in Literacy Squared. Some publishing companies have even attempted to create paired literacy programs. As we attend conferences, we are continually reminded of our influence among practitioners when we hear educators refer to the components of our program by name.*

*We have not encountered significant resistance from practitioners in the field.*

*However, a significant obstacle is the fact that the majority of states continue to mandate high-stakes monolingual English assessments as accountability measures. This approach devalues biliteracy, incentivizing schools to provide English-only instruction.*

*In addition, in order to be fully implemented, Literacy Squared requires that schools invest in professional development for teachers. The program also has a research component. Further, schools need to invest time and money in acquiring paired literacy books and materials. Many districts lack the financial means to fully implement all of these components.*

*Finally, the Literacy Squared research team at CU Boulder is small. Current demand far exceeds our capacity to provide full and complete implementation to all of the districts in all of the states where there is interest in implementation. We are exploring alternate approaches to serve schools and districts. We hope to implement a trainer of trainers model in the near future in which we help prepare district site leadership to implement Literacy Squared practices. That way, local districts can fully implement Literacy Squared under our guidance but using a delivery model that our small team can sustain.*

## NEPC Resources on Language and Learning

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