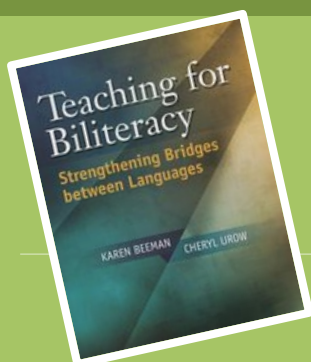


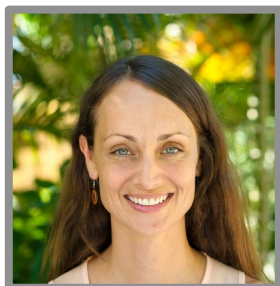


Sustaining a Study Group focused on *Teaching for Biliteracy*

A Case Study from
La Paz Community School

Guanacaste, Costa Rica

Authors



Sara McGowan
La Paz Community School



Elizabeth Howard,
University of Connecticut



Our School

La Paz is a non-profit, cooperative, experiential learning International Baccalaureate World school located on the Pacific Coast in rural Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

We are a prek-12th grade, Spanish/English two-way immersion school. The school is led by an administrative team that includes a full-time director and four additional teacher-administrators who split their time between teaching and administrative duties within the different grade-level strands of the school (primary, upper elementary, and secondary).





Our Students & Staff

Our student population includes approximately 300 students, comprising 40% Costa Ricans, 40% North Americans, and 20% other nationalities.

Our staff is nearly as diverse as our student population, which provides for rich perspectives and interesting discussions, but also its share of challenges when planning and engaging in effective professional development. Some staff members speak and read Spanish only, some speak and read English only, but most are somewhere on the bilingual continuum.

Our Goal for the Book Study

After attending La Cosecha in 2014, the school administrative team decided to start a study group based around *Teaching for Biliteracy: Strengthening Bridges between Languages*, by Beeman and Urow. In particular, we were drawn to the focus on promoting biliteracy by creating bridges between languages, since that was a pressing need of our prek-6th program at the time. We felt reasonably comfortable with our quality of instruction within each language, but knew that we needed to do more to link instruction across languages.

Considering Our Challenges

Implementing a meaningful book study with our entire prek-6th grade staff raised considerable challenges, however, including those related to language, resources, time, and motivation.

First, the book is only available in English, which made it inaccessible to our monolingual Spanish-speaking teachers. Second, because of budget constraints and shipping limitations, La Paz only had a handful of physical copies of the book, thus requiring book sharing. Third, with our busy schedules and to-do lists, an additional challenge was finding sufficient time to read the chapters and discuss them as a staff. Finally, and most importantly, we needed teacher buy-in.

We needed everyone to understand why the content of the book would help improve our teaching and strengthen our school community. Teacher motivation was essential if the staff was going to truly absorb the content and apply it through peer observations and feedback.

Cognizant of these challenges, we looked to the research base on effective professional development to create our plan for the book study group. Specifically, we were guided by this quote from Coleman & Goldenberg (2010, p. 161):

“Effecting change in classroom practice is a time-consuming process that requires considerable investment and energy. Efforts can take one to three years and involve trainings and workshops, meetings, intensive summer programs, follow-up in classrooms, and ongoing, continuous efforts to improve practice and student outcomes... professional development cannot be of the one-shot workshop variety. Instead, it must be embedded in the work lives of teachers and the routines of teaching. Specifically, it must provide direct and concrete assistance in addressing the challenges of practice teachers face daily.”

Thus, our plan involved a multi-pronged approach, integrating workshops, book group meetings, co-planning and standards alignment, and sharing of practice over a two-year period.

*We were in this
together.*



Getting Started

Our first step was to provide a whole group overview of the Biliteracy Unit Framework during our allotted professional development day in January to get our staff motivated and excited. Liz, who worked as a K/1 Spanish teacher at La Paz that year, read the book over the winter break and volunteered to deliver a brief workshop introducing the key points of the book. This presentation was carried out bilingually, and provided all teachers with a shared context for our work going forward.

Shortly after, Sara (who is the primary school administrator as well as a second grade teacher) launched our book study with our prek-2nd grade teachers, who taught on a separate primary campus at that time, and who met weekly as a staff. To increase buy-in and efficiency, we decided to embed the talks into these regularly scheduled staff meetings. We shared the book copies amongst the English literate teachers with the goal of reading two chapters every few weeks. There was only one Spanish monolingual teacher in the prek-2nd group, and she was asked to view corresponding content on the *Teaching for Biliteracy* website and come to meetings prepared to share what she had learned.

Although it was never framed as mandatory, the study group was also not given as a choice. We needed everyone involved. We were in this together. Thankfully, no teacher ever asked, “Do we have to do this?” but if they had, perhaps we would have responded in a similar way that we reply to students: “Do you like challenging yourself?” In addition to the dual language component, La Paz has a strong focus on socio-emotional learning, with an emphasis on instructional practices like mindfulness, cross-grade learning, peace practices, and growth mindset. As a result, there is ongoing discussion and modeling of challenging ourselves, taking risks, and learning from mistakes, and these dispositions are valued and encouraged among the teaching staff as well as the students.

Key Components of Our Book Discussions

The organization of the book discussions varied during meetings; however, a few components remained consistent.

- We always seated ourselves in bilingual pairs so that we were able to have ongoing checks for understanding, and we kept the discussions brief and manageable (20-30 minutes).
- As with the preK-2nd staff meetings in general, the book discussions were conducted bilingually, but primarily in Spanish, due to the presence of a Spanish monolingual in the group and the reasonable Spanish proficiency of the primary English teachers.
- The ways in which we discussed *Teaching for Biliteracy* differed at each meeting depending upon the content of the chapters, as well as time constraints and staff energy and stress levels - this was a ‘real world’ activity, after all! Just as we must read our students in order to create an optimal learning environment, we must also read our teachers and plan accordingly.
- Trying to make things manageable for the leader, too, we utilized the pre-made book study guides on the *Teaching for Biliteracy* website as much as possible (at the time, there were only guides for certain chapters). In addition, Sara would photocopy key paragraphs or questions at the end of each chapter for the staff to discuss, first in bilingual pairs and later with the whole group.
- Due to scheduling issues, a few of our book talks actually occurred online. Each teacher was asked to respond to one of the questions on an email chain and “reply all” over the course of a few weeks. The results of discussing these chapters were surprisingly enriching and some teachers even preferred online discussions.

Applying Our Learning...

After reading some of the chapters that focused specifically on biliteracy strategies that provided concrete ideas for integrating these strategies into our lessons, Sara asked the staff to be brave and try a new strategy in their classrooms.

We agreed that during our subsequent book talk, we would process our attempt - how we felt about it, how we thought it was successful, how we might do it differently in the future, what remaining doubts and questions we had, etc. As is often the case among dedicated life-long learners, we found that our questions often led to further questions

...and Learning from Each Other

When the primary cohort had nearly finished reading *Teaching for Biliteracy*, teachers were invited to set up peer observations with one another. The goal was to formally try out a strategy described in the book and have a peer observe this lesson. Because most of us had little to no prior experience planning a lesson using the Biliteracy Unit Framework (BUF), we were essentially all in the same boat and willing to put ourselves out there. Again, the school wide focus on socio-emotional development plays a big part here: it helps that our school environment seeps teamwork and trust, thereby helping teachers to feel safe taking risks and to believe that there is always something we can learn from our peers.



After reading some of the chapters that focused specifically on biliteracy strategies... Sara asked the staff to be brave and try a new strategy in their classrooms...



...[and] during our subsequent book talk, we would process our attempt - how we felt about it, how we thought it was successful, how we might do it differently in the future, what remaining doubts and questions we had.



*An example of
The Bridge:*

*Transfer of Content
and Contrastive Analysis
(punctuation)*

Our peer observation protocol called for a short discussion prior to the observation so that the observer knew what to expect, as well as a post-observation discussion to process new insights. Teachers initiated the observations themselves, either sending out an email with proposed times and activities and soliciting peer observers, or informally making connections during lunch or other unscheduled moment. If needed, substitute teachers (typically another teacher who was not with a class at the time) were provided to make it possible for everyone to observe another teacher.

Observation expectations were intentionally kept short and manageable-about 20 minutes long. Every staff member used the same peer observation form, which continues to be used to this day. During our subsequent staff meetings, teachers would share something positive that they observed during the lesson. This was a great time for teachers to shine by having best practices promoted by their peers. It also kept us all accountable!

Expanding Our Professional Learning Community

When the smaller cohort of prek-2nd grade teachers had gotten sufficient momentum by reading and discussing the entire book, trying some of the strategies, and observing one another, the 3rd-6th grade teachers were ready to tackle the book study. At this point, the role of the prek-2nd teachers became one of ongoing experimentation with newly learned strategies, as well as serving as advisors to the larger 3rd to 6th grade cohort.



It's important to note that the administrative team placed a priority on this activity and arranged for release time for both Liz and the upper elementary Spanish teachers to make it possible.



Due to the fact that the 3rd-6th grade group had several Spanish monolingual teachers on staff, the book study needed to be organized differently, incorporating the 'preview/review' strategy frequently used with English Language Learners in the United States.

Prior to the group discussion of a given chapter, Liz previewed the upcoming topic in Spanish with the Spanish teachers by doing a picture/table walk through the chapter, showing a related video, and/or providing some classroom examples from her work in K/1.

The Spanish teachers would then come to the book talk with some prior knowledge and participate in the discussion with support from their bilingual partners. The rest of the teachers used a jigsaw reading approach for most of the chapters; that is, they were responsible for reading a particular chapter and then sharing a summary of their chapter at the next book talk, which included 'ah-ha moments,' and questions to discuss as a group. Some chapters, however, were deemed so essential and applicable that they were read and summarized by all of the English monolingual or bilingual teachers. This process occurred over the course of several months. Following each group discussion, Spanish teachers debriefed with Liz in Spanish and clarified misunderstandings that may have arisen during the group discussion.

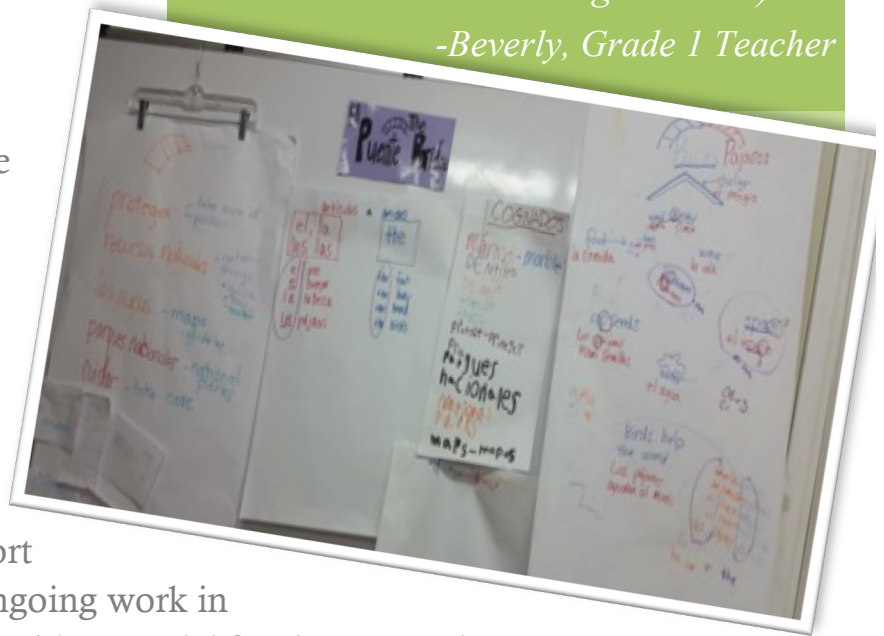
It's important to note that the administrative team placed a priority on this activity and arranged for release time for both Liz and the upper elementary Spanish teachers to make it possible.

This year we have our Spanish wall, English wall, and Bridge wall (which is more or less the "bilingual" wall).

-Beverly, Grade 1 Teacher

On Friday mornings at La Paz, classes work together in cross-grade learning groups, which means that there are several teachers working with each combined group. As a result, this time provided the needed flexibility to release Liz and the upper elementary Spanish teachers to do the book study work instead.

When the upper elementary cohort was nearly finished reading and discussing the book, the primary cohort arranged a 'museum' to share their ongoing work in implementing the strategies and to provide a model for the upper elementary teachers. This is also in keeping with a core La Paz practice, of sharing final work conducted over the course of multi-week thematic study with the larger school community. During a staff meeting block, the upper elementary teachers visited each primary classroom as a group. Prek-2nd grade teachers felt empowered to share Bridge posters, anchor charts and songs, as well as to answer questions and listen to suggestions offered by their upper elementary colleagues.



The Next Chapter of Our Learning

Our learning did not stop there. We knew the book talk was just the foundation for continued professional development, and that real change takes time and consistent revisiting. To facilitate this change, the K-6 staff also worked to develop a basic biliteracy curriculum map to indicate which standards would be taught in English, in Spanish, and in both languages for each theme. Drawing on the Common Core State Standards in English and Spanish as well as the Costa Rican Spanish language arts standards from the ministry of education, the English and Spanish partner teachers worked together at weekly after-school meetings during the last trimester to create the maps as a basis for biliteracy instruction the following year. That school year then started with a whole-staff review of what we learned through our book study. Peer observations were once again put into place, and time was carved out at staff meetings to share our successes and challenges with implementing biliteracy teaching strategies.

This fall, our administration planned another refresher workshop, specifically on implementing The Bridge, to educate our newly hired teachers and to summarize our learning process that began nearly two years ago.

Administration led a four corners assessment and asked teachers to physically move to the corner of the room that best corresponded to their understanding of The Bridge (1=never heard of it; 2=somewhat familiar; 3= very familiar; 4= expert). Teachers self-assessing as a 1 or 2 were matched up with teachers self-assessing as a 3 (interestingly, no teachers rated themselves a 4).

Teachers who had participated in our book study shared their knowledge and continuing questions with those less familiar or confident with The Bridge. As a result, the most powerful learning moments during this workshop did not come from a formal presentation, but rather, from peer to peer teaching. After reviewing a slideshow of photos and examples of Bridge work taken directly from previous peer observations, grade level teams worked together to plan a two-way Bridge for our next thematic unit.

Now that the groundwork has been laid and revisited multiple times, our focus is shifting to purposefully planning and documenting our biliteracy units. At the same time, we are continuously revisiting content from the book to enrich our teaching and provide more detailed observation feedback for one another. We are also continuing to participate in formal workshops. This year, three members of our teaching team - one English teacher and two Spanish teachers - are participating in the *Teaching for Biliteracy* pre-conference institute at La Cosecha.

References

Coleman, R. & Goldenberg, C. (Summer 2010). What Does the Research Say about Effective Practices for English Learners? Part IV: Models for Schools and Districts. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*.

Visit the Center for Teaching for Biliteracy website
www.teachingforbiliteracy.com
to find the following resources mentioned in this article:

- Book Study Guides (section: *Resources*)
- Videos of biliteracy strategies in action (section: *Videos*)
- Information on Spanish Literacy Development (section: *en español*)
- Biliteracy Unit Framework Template and sample BUFs (section: *BUFs*)

Tips for Starting a Book Study Group

If your district or school is considering forming a study group about *Teaching for Biliteracy*, La Paz would like to offer the suggestions on the next page, based on our first hand experience.



Be Realistic

First, be realistic when launching the book study and start small, gradually involving more teachers with time. If it seems more practical, begin with one or two teachers who are willing to read the book in its entirety and/or attend a *Teaching for Biliteracy* workshop, and allow them to spark the enthusiasm for others.

Determine the right timing for bringing additional staff into the study group, and work to avoid competing demands. Be sensitive to the time constraints on your staff and incorporate book talks into existing meeting times, keeping the discussions brief.

Commit to a Long-Term Plan

Second, plan for a long-term, sustained effort that eventually includes all teachers. Clearly specify goals and timelines and have accountability in place for them. Commit to revisiting strategies in the book as needed over the course of one or more school years, and be patient with the ebb and flow of each individual teacher's learning process.

Be Creative and Flexible

Third, identify potential roadblocks and find creative solutions that work in your context. Be flexible in terms of how teachers will access the material-for example, reading the book, watching videos online, seeing demonstrations by peers, attending workshops, participating in discussions, etc. Work with teachers to make the study group feasible; for example, by using an online format at times, or by providing release time as needed for meetings and peer observations.

Encourage Risk-Taking

Finally, model professional risk-taking and encourage teachers to likewise push themselves outside of their comfort zones. Be sure to provide opportunities to share this growth and learning process with others. The results are well worth the effort!