



Chapter 3

Teachers: Capitalizing on Life Experiences and Diversity

Key Points

- The cultural and linguistic background of teachers affects their understanding of students and their interpretation of how to instruct in Spanish and English.
- All teachers of Spanish literacy require specific professional development on how to teach literacy in Spanish in the United States. However, few teacher preparation programs in the United States include this requirement; so many teachers who teach in Spanish require additional professional opportunities.
- Literacy learning is enhanced when teachers are reflective and aware of their own strengths and challenges.

Book Study Activity Objectives: Participants will:

Participate in a reader's theater activity and identify the following:

- Strengths of each teacher depicted in the readers' theater
- Challenges of each teacher
- The teacher to whom they are most similar
- How to create a collaborative environment with their peers that includes trust, flexibility, and a shared vision.

Instructions for activities, and notes for book study leader:

Notes for book study leader:

- Provide copies of the Reader's Theater (below) for each participant.
- Divide the participants into groups of four. Then ask each member of the group to choose a teacher to read: Elena, Monica, Susan, or Kelly.
- Participants read through the reader's theater script.
- After reading, participants answer the questions that follow the text.

Reader's Theater: *The Birth of a Biliteracy Professional Learning Community*

CONTEXT: As part of a district-wide initiative, four teachers have been asked to come together to represent teachers teaching for biliteracy. The initiative asks for representation of different stakeholders on a PLC that will focus on collaboration among teachers.

This meeting's agenda is to have the teachers get to know each other, identify strengths and weaknesses in the current program (including differentiated instruction and quality of materials) and to come ready to share ways these four specific teachers can collaborate together.

Susan begins the meeting by saying:

SUSAN: Okay, we have about an hour to cover all this material. I guess we should begin by introducing ourselves. I'll start. I'm from here, learned Spanish in high school and at the university. I also worked in the service industry alongside many Latino immigrants, and I had the opportunity to study in Spain. One of my struggles is with that new student, Antonio. He uses such sophisticated language that sometimes I don't understand what he is saying and I am embarrassed. I guess I should read more in Spanish. I have to tell you I am excited about immigration reform and am marching this weekend to pressure for its passage. I think it's a really tough time for immigrants in our country.

Susan gestures toward Monica.

MONICA: I am going to the march as well. Ever since I joined the immigrants' rights group I belong to in Pilsen (inner-city Chicago), where I grew up, I have learned so much about the issues faced by my parents and community. I guess I didn't learn a lot about the Latino perspective growing up as an immigrant kid in Chicago. It just wasn't part of the curriculum. I wish they had taught us more about our history and I wish my Spanish were better. They exited me out of the transitional bilingual program by 2nd grade and so I am really good at the George Lopez Spanish, but sometimes I can't understand a lot of words in the texts I have to use to teach. Gosh! I wish we could take classes in Spanish just for bilingual teachers.

ELENA: I am glad this meeting is in English because I want to improve my English. I studied to be a teacher in Guatemala and I have taught many years in Spanish in my country. I realize parents are

concerned about my accent in English. I guess I can help you with how to teach in Spanish if you help me with my accent. I can also help you with Spanish grammar rules, like where to place accent marks.

KELLY: I, too, am glad this meeting is in English. I would so love to learn Spanish, but I don't know it now. I took a few years of Spanish in high school, but I don't remember much. I am very excited to be part of this team and to work on teaching for biliteracy. I can help with anything to do with English! I know a lot about Readers' and Writers' Workshop!

MONICA: Elena, since you actually learned how to teach kids to read in Spanish, could you explain to me why my students seem stuck with the names of letters? I thought they knew them really well and they can't seem to apply that knowledge in a fluent way.

ELENA: But why are you spending your time on letter names? I know that's done in English, and our program includes it, but it's not necessary in Spanish in order to learn how to read. Kids do learn letter names later, but it's letter sounds we focus on during the early stages of literacy development, and syllables are the most important skill to quickly get to. It's a waste of time and it's confusing to students to teach letter names at the beginning of literacy in Spanish, and so I just skip over it and emphasize letter sounds, strong and weak vowels, and then move to syllables.

MONICA: Really? But our program is a translated version of the English program. I thought we were supposed to teach kids to read and write the same as we do in English. That's what I was told.

SUSAN: No wonder my kids are confused. We certainly don't know what we are doing. What a mess! But what about Readers' and Writers' Workshop? Should we teach those the same in both English and Spanish?

KELLY: Readers' and Writers' Workshop are wonderful because they really get the students reading and writing every day, and in lots of different genres. Elena, I'm hoping you can help me find some great mentor texts in Spanish.

ELENA: I can suggest some great books from Guatemala that I have used. I usually read a bit from the book and then ask students to copy some sentences from the book that I write on the board. That's how we teach writing in Guatemala. Paulo is a real problem for me because he doesn't speak Spanish well

and he doesn't speak English well, and he writes the same way as he speaks. I don't even know why he's in my classroom since he cannot speak either language well. My principal wants me to stop having the students copy from the board, and engage students in more free writing, but I'm not familiar with that.

KELLY: Oh, I can help you with that. But I'm finding the same thing with Paulo when I teach Writers' Workshop in English. He seems to understand the book I read, but then he has trouble writing in English. I was thinking that a book in Spanish would help him.

MONICA: That's so interesting, because I really identify with Paulo since I speak just like him. I'm sure he understands much of what he reads in both English and in Spanish, but I also know that expressing himself through writing can be challenging. I find that by contrasting his informal language (*soquetines*) with his formal language (socks and *calcetines*), he learns really quickly. My problem is that, like Susan, I want to improve my academic Spanish. I am so embarrassed to not know when to use accents, and to not always understand some of the really fancy words in texts. I wish I could spend time in a Spanish speaking country. Though I'm a Latina, I've never travelled to Latin America or Spain.

DISCUSSION

At your tables, discuss the following:

- What are the strengths of each of these teachers
- What are their challenges?
- Who are you most similar to?
- What needs to be in place in order to create a collaborative environment of trust, flexibility, and a shared vision?

How would each of these four teachers address the following principles of teaching for biliteracy, and how could we support them in doing so?

- It is important to respect and value student's home and community language.
- It is important to provide students with good academic language models in the classroom.
- Teachers who plan their language use beforehand are better models of academic language
- In the classroom, new skills and information are introduced through strategies that both make the information highly comprehensible and that explicitly build oral academic language in anticipation of reading and writing.