The Earliest Connections: Bridging in Kindergarten
By Susan Pryor

Beginning with Biliteracy: A Kindergarten Story
Kindergarten is a time of many new things in our students' lives...a new school, new teachers, new friends...and for our emerging bilingual students, a new way of talking and thinking about languages. Depending on their background experiences, kindergarteners come to us with different levels of awareness and understanding about languages. Some are not aware that there are two languages, even if they speak them both. Others may understand that they speak to mom and dad in different ways, although they may not know that the difference is due to language. Some monolingual students may be aware that they are going to learn another way of speaking in their new school (especially if their parents have engaged them in this type of conversation before the first day of school). Over the course of the kindergarten year, all of these students will increase their metalinguistic awareness as we introduce and engage them in making connections between the two languages they are developing.

Bridging is a rich strategy that complements the knowledge and the skills that children develop during the kindergarten year. Kindergarten teachers of emerging bilinguals are in a unique position because we are responsible for starting our students down the road to metalinguistic awareness.

Bridging & Kindergarten: A Natural Fit

The Bridge implicitly addresses so many important skills that kindergartners need to learn. When we generate lists or draw and label a diagram of what children have learned, we are modeling important writing skills. If we title the Bridge with a question, we have an opportunity to talk about punctuation. The processes that are at the heart of bridging—observing, noticing, comparing and contrasting—are also key science and math skills in the kindergarten curriculum. Understanding the concepts of same/different and analyzing features also build children’s ability to sort and classify objects (another key math skill). As we engage children in discussing the features of languages (e.g., differing letter sounds or the need to add an article in Spanish), we are helping them build an understanding of what a letter and a word are. It is important to note that these are not the things that we plan to do in a Bridge—but acknowledging that they are implicit in the process of bridging demonstrates both the appropriateness and the richness of bridging for kindergarteners.

Like many other things, bridging is a new concept for kindergarten students. Kindergarten teachers are well versed in using modeling and thinking aloud as strategies to teach their students how to do new things. We can apply these same strategies to teach our students about bridging. This early modeling does not diminish the importance of active student engagement during bridging. Bridging is first and foremost student-centered and student-driven, but our youngest emergent bilinguals benefit from scaffolding and from a gradual release of responsibility as they become more aware of what bridging is.

Building a Foundation for Bridging

Before doing the first Bridge with my students, I begin working on helping them understand that we are using two distinct languages. I promote this understanding by associating a different color with each language and incorporating those colors into our daily activities when I speak, write, or read to my students.

Early in the year, I also begin working on students’ familiarity with the concepts of same, different, and similar. These concepts are key components of sorting and classifying objects and can easily be integrated into the exploration of materials in the classroom during the first month of school and/or into an early math unit on sorting and classifying. Students build understanding of these concepts by applying
them to a variety of concrete objects and manipulatives first. In doing so, we honor the developmentally appropriate practice of moving from concrete to abstract in our work with young children.

I create an anchor chart that illustrates each concept using one of the concrete objects we explored and we establish gestures for each concept. This year, we used paintbrushes and a square manipulative to illustrate the concepts of same, different and similar. After the concept and the anchor chart is established, then we are ready to apply the concepts to languages during the first Bridge.

When I help my students recognize that they are using two languages and build their understanding of the concepts of same, different, and similar, I am providing scaffolds that will enable them to engage successfully in the process of bridging and to realize its benefits. The process of bridging does not happen in a vacuum…it happens under the umbrella of the bigger processes of comparing and contrasting.

First Things First: The Biliteracy Unit

Similarly, the Bridge is one part of a biliteracy unit. It exists in relation to big ideas that provide the substance that we will compare and contrast. The Bridge happens after all the concepts that students will learn have been taught in one language and a summative assessment demonstrates that students have mastered that content. A well-developed unit based on standards that are addressed in the context of big ideas is a prerequisite of an effective and successful Bridge.

The important thing about the Bridge is that it is a comparison and discussion of the features of each language (phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics). The purpose of the Bridge is to give students an opportunity to identify similarities and differences between the two languages. Children do not make these kinds of comparisons if they don’t have opportunities to see the languages side by side. Although we begin the process of bridging by asking children about the content of the unit, and then translate what they come up with, those are simply means to an end. Those are simply steps in creating the text that we will use to do the real work of bridging—comparing and contrasting languages to make the similarities and differences explicit.

In my next post, I will continue to describe how I have implemented bridging in my kindergarten classroom. This will include what I consider when planning for a Bridge, the features of language that I have found most salient and appropriate for contrastive analysis in kindergarten, and a step-by-step description of how the process of bridging unfolds in my kindergarten classroom.