Four Bilingual Educators
In the popular press, bilingual education gets the broad-brush treatment. In reality, of course, bilingual education is more nuanced and many-faceted than readers of the op-ed page would be led to believe. Not long ago, The San Diego Writing Project brought together four bilingual teachers, all from different backgrounds — María-Luisa Berry, Esperanza Salazar McGüigan, Rocío Weiss and Linda Sue Whiteside — to take part in a dialogue that would get beyond the headlines. These were the teachers who implemented the first Bilingual Open Program of the San Diego Area Writing Project, conducted entirely in Spanish. Thirty-six bilingual education teachers from all over San Diego County participated in this program which demonstrated how the participants effectively taught their students in Spanish high-level reading, writing and thinking skills. This reflective conversation among the four facilitators of this program is presented in English in order to reach the largest possible audience.

How and Why We Became Bilingual Educators

ESPERANZA: I grew up in Northern California at a time when my family was the only Mexican family living in each of the small towns where we lived. I was monolingual in Spanish until I started school. After that I entered a world where I spoke, read and wrote English outside my home and used oral Spanish exclusively inside my home. My father valued the use of English in terms of its usefulness for upward mobility. However, I was not allowed to use English at home because my father demanded that I “be Mexican” and retain my culture. This is probably the only reason that I retained any skill at all in Spanish. I remember my first day of school when my well-meaning Anglo teacher, in an effort to “Americanize” me, registered me on the school role as “Hope.” However, what neither of us realized was that by doing this she had stripped me of my culture, my language and my identity. I remember my feelings of extreme frustration and fear because I didn’t know what was going on in the classroom or how to respond to it.
In time I experienced a great deal of success in school but I was not really secure about my knowledge of English until I studied at the university level. When I began taking university classes in Spanish I realized that even though Spanish was my first oral language, my first literate language was English. In addition, the oral household Spanish I knew was not at the academic level. Therefore, I had to learn academic Spanish almost as a third language.

**ROCÍO:** In my home Spanish and English were always spoken because my father was an English-dominant Spanish teacher. He had married a Mexican woman who had learned English as a teenager. They both were very bilingual people and they taught me that all things in the world had two names, the Spanish name and the English name. In addition, as I was growing up my father was conscientious about teaching us about other cultures and other languages. For example, he would play African music at home. (I still can hear it!) He would take us to the Japanese spring festival at the Buddhist temple in San Diego. There we would experience Japanese foods, music and crafts. When I was about to enter kindergarten, my parents decided to live in Tijuana, Mexico, just across the border from the U.S., so that us kids would learn Spanish "the right way" (in those days there were no bilingual programs in California).

My first literacy experience was in Spanish. It was much later in life that I learned to read and write in English. In contrast to your experience, Esperanza, English was my second literate language. In fact, it wasn’t until I had to take the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) that I learned the principles of the five-paragraph essay, or that there was persuasive writing, cause and effect writing, reflective writing or autobiographical writing. After failing English 101 so many times in a community college, I never thought I would amount to anything in this world. I have walked a long way on the literacy path. I’m currently writing my thesis to complete my Master’s degree.
MARÍA-LUISA: I was born and educated in Mexico. I did not follow the pattern set by my sisters, who attended high school at a Catholic boarding school in San Antonio, Texas. Instead, I pursued my teaching preparation career in Mexico. My only formal education in English occurred for forty minutes twice a week when I was in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade. These lessons were from a heavily accented teacher who had learned English as a second language. However, I always had the desire to learn English. I had seen American films and read books that I scavenged in an effort to become proficient. I received my degree from normal school, a teacher-training college. I accepted a teaching position in Colegio La Paz in the border city of Tijuana, Mexico, where I assumed I would have more access to instruction in English. However, it became almost impossible for me to find appropriate English classes in Tijuana and in San Diego, due to a lack of transportation and
unfamiliarity with the United States' educational system. Ironically, rather than learning and practicing more English, I began studying French in San Diego. While in a French class I met the American man who would later become my husband. I have achieved most of my English proficiency as a result of my communication with family and because I am a prolific reader.

**LINDA SUE:** My story is quite a bit different from the three of you because I grew up in a family where only English was spoken. My family moved frequently because my father was in the Air Force and we were stationed in Korea and Germany, but never in a Spanish-speaking country.

After two years of Spanish at San Diego State University, my Spanish education truly began when I spent a year in Spain at the University of Granada. When I returned to San Diego State to enroll in the elementary Bilingual Education program, I worked for an organization in Tijuana that offered a Saturday school for children. The families were a mixture of Mexican citizens and newly arrived immigrants from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala who lived in the "colonias" that were often prevented from attending school during the week because of impassable roads and other reasons. During this time I also lived in a house on the San Diego State University campus where the residents were actively involved in the political struggles of refugees who were arriving in the U.S. as a result of the wars in Central America. I began to speak Spanish daily and interact with people who helped open my eyes about the complex workings of the border region, immigration, migrant workers and political asylum. At this time I became particularly interested in working with migrant students.
Who Are Our Students?

ROCÍO: At a recent art opening, a person to whom I had just been introduced asked me what I did for a living. "I’m a teacher," was my response. "Oh really? Where do you teach?" was the next question. "I teach at San Diego High." "Oh my God! You teach there?!?" But the truth is at San Diego High we do not have metal detectors at the entrance to the school, there are no armed security guards, and no one walks around with a baseball bat in their hand. The reality is that San Diego High is like any other high school in our city. Granted, it is an inner-city school, most of the students live at or below the poverty level, and almost 63 percent of the students speak Spanish as their first language. In my eyes these attributes are what make San Diego High unique. This incredible tapestry of faces, of different tones and hues, of different sounds and scents is what keeps me there.

San Diego High is home to almost 500 learners of English as a second language. They are fortunate because our school is one of the only high schools in the area that has a comprehensive secondary bilingual education program in place. In addition to ESL classes, our students can take biology, social studies, and math classes taught in Spanish. During lunch burritos are sold along with sandwiches and hamburgers, banda music can be heard along with rap and hip hop, and Spanish and English are spoken almost simultaneously. Esperanza teaches at San Diego High also. What are your thoughts about our students, Esperanza?
ESPERANZA: I agree with what you've said. I teach advanced English as a second language and advanced Spanish for Spanish speakers. Some of my students are immigrants and others were born in this country. Sometimes I find that there is a difference in their perceptions of life. The immigrant students usually have the philosophy that if they work hard they can live the American dream of having a good job, a house, a nice family, etc. On the other hand, for some of my U.S.-born Chicano students, the promise of a better life for them and for their family has become a series of broken dreams and disillusionments. They see that the economic and social level of their family has not risen and they believe that it never will. Many times the family members are in entry-level jobs where they earn very little and have a limited future. Also, there may be feelings of hopelessness because of the surrounding pressures of gangs, drugs, violence and poverty. However, many students achieve success, as they define it, on their own terms. María-Luisa, who are your students?

MARÍA-LUISA: For the most part, my students come from families of new immigrants. Their parents do not speak English and are in entry-level jobs, if they have a job at all. Approximately 50 percent of my students come from homes where there is a single parent, a mother. Most of the families of my students left Mexico seeking a better life. Most parents have finished only
elementary school, but some even less; two of them are illiterate in Spanish, as they speak Zapotec as their first language. Most are struggling to have enough money to eat and a place to live.

Parents usually do not verbalize their expectations in terms of monetary achievement. They express their expectations for their children in terms of human values such as honesty, loyalty, hard work, and respect for themselves and others. I see consistency between what they expect and how they manage their families. They are all very cooperative in school matters. Many mothers, and some fathers, volunteer in my classroom and in the school’s parents’ room. Most of them are very cooperative about working with their son or daughter at home in reading or math, in spite of their limited education. Their generosity was apparent during our recent Christmas party. Prior to this year I had always provided all the food for the class Christmas party. This year the parents organized themselves and brought in all kinds of wonderful Mexican treats for the entire class.
LINDA SUE: I teach in a rural agricultural community at one of four K-8 schools that offers a two-way bilingual education program. The student population of the small district is 65 percent Anglo, 25 percent Hispanic and 10 percent Native American.

Many of the Hispanic families in my district live in trailers, small houses or temporary shelters. Generally speaking, the men work in orchards while the women stay at home or clean houses for additional family income. Others live on the neighboring Indian Reservation. Many of the parents of my Hispanic students have limited or no prior schooling and see their life in this country as a sacrificial journey, hoping for a better life for their children. They are very concerned with their children’s academic progress and stress values such as honesty, hard work and respect for teachers. Although the district does not have the overt violence problems commonly associated with larger districts, there is racial tension between students that is most visible in the upper grades. Violence, drugs and poverty shadow the lives of some of the families that live in clustered trailers on the reservation and throughout the community groves.

I teach my fifth-grade students half of the time in Spanish and the other half in English. My classroom is filled with English learners (anyone who is learning English as an additional language) and Spanish learners (anyone who is learning Spanish as an added language). These students are immensely varied in levels of ability, depending on the language of the week, access to prior schooling and date of entrance into the program. The inspiring part of this situation is that, out of necessity, many of the students have developed an advanced capacity for working with others and integrating problem-solving strategies within the classroom. The children have access to literature translated into Spanish from English, Spanish/English dictionaries and a wide array of books written in Spanish in the school library. Ninety percent of the Hispanic students in the district come from migrant families. The Migrant Program office offers direct and indirect support services, such as tutoring and medical clinic visits. The recent federal change in migrant qualification has reduced the number of students that are entitled to services from the Migrant Office.
I am still learning about the language and culture of all of my students on a daily basis. As an Anglo educator, I am aware of the experiential gaps that exist between myself and some of my students. Each day is an opportunity for me to learn more and I feel very fortunate to be a bilingual teacher. Esperanza, how long have you been a bilingual teacher?

**ESPERANZA:** I’ve been teaching for 26 years and I find that my students are coming in less literate than when I first started teaching. When I first started in bilingual education in 1970, I was teaching at the elementary level and my students were mostly from rural, low socio-economic backgrounds but had some skills. Today I find that many of my students do not have the same level of preparation in their first language as they did in the past.

**MARÍA-LUISA:** Do you think the political and economic situation in Mexico may have something to do with this?

**ESPERANZA:** Absolutely! After having observed and listened to my immigrant students, it’s obvious that there are problems. The rising population and the decreasing role of the government in basic education in some foreign countries are causing students to arrive at San Diego High School with fewer academic skills than they used to.
ROCÍO: What is becoming obvious is that a discussion of literacy among bilingual students is incredibly complex because of the diversity of literacy experiences our students have had. We work with students who have recently arrived from other Third World countries and who have little or no literacy. Given the proximity of the U.S. border with Mexico, we have students who go back and forth between our two school systems. We have students who come with the strong puritanical work ethic that has been common in immigrants throughout history and they do very well in our schools, making the transition from their first language to English very quickly.

ESPERANZA: We also have students who, for social, economic or political reasons have not gone to school at all, or have had such a limited education in their first language that they are only partially literate. How can they transfer non-existent skills from their first language to their second language?

What Bilingual Educators Need

LINDA SUE: We need professional articles and books written in the language we will use for teaching. We can’t rely on translated works because it’s not just the idea that needs to be conveyed and received, but also the syntactical structure that the language conveys. Metaphors do not translate directly from one language to another; they’re imbedded in the cultural context. There’s a gap between the translated language and where the learner is.

Also, there’s an assumption that professional development should be the same, no matter the program in which you teach. However, the fact of the matter is that each community of learners has unique needs. Therefore, professional development should be tailored to the needs of that community. Part of this professional development could come from on-site sources, such as bilingual professionals who share their expertise and life experiences with their colleagues.
Linda Sue Whiteside

ROCÍO: It seems that biliteracy has not been highly valued on the part of the educational system. This is clearly shown by the lack of professional development opportunities available to bilingual educators in the target language. If we don’t require that at least half of the professional growth hours be in the target language for bilingual teachers, it stands to reason that staff development opportunities in the teaching language will be limited.

Some bilingual education professionals don’t treat their teaching language with the same respect that they treat English. The learning of the second language may have been a vehicle for employment and not necessarily a commitment to biliteracy. The fact is, some bilingual teachers are not proficient in their teaching language. They need to upgrade their skills, sometimes even basic skills, in the target language. Take, for example, notices from the classroom that are sent home with gross errors in the target language. This would never be condoned in English.

LINDA SUE: This is precisely why programs like the Bilingual Open Program are so vital to bilingual education professionals.
MARÍA-LUISA: Yes, during last summer's Bilingual Open Program, many teachers were elated to discover their own writing voice in Spanish for the first time, even though many of the participants had been teaching in a bilingual setting for many years.

Simply having the time, space and audience to talk with their colleagues in Spanish about issues concerning the teaching of writing in their bilingual classrooms was an opportunity they had never had before. Another aspect that was unique about the program was that all of the writing, critical thinking and discussion activities were conducted in Spanish. Therefore, they were in a professional setting, using academic Spanish. Regrettably, the professional literature that we used was written in English because of the tremendous dearth of suitable Spanish-language material. This clearly showed the need for development and publication of Spanish-language professional materials. Many of the participants were very excited about the philosophical discussions of the economic, racial, gender and cultural issues that affect our students.

Because of the philosophical perspective we took in choosing the articles, it was inevitable that there would be some aspect of self-reflection which allowed for heated and honest discussion about each participant's role in bilingual education.

Diego Davalos, Co-Director of the San Diego Area Writing Project, brought these educators together to facilitate their discussion.