March 1992. It’s 1:30 in the afternoon in a third grade Spanish-English bilingual classroom in Phoenix, Arizona. It’s writing time, and the children are working on their current projects. At her desk, eight-year-old Lilia is busy illustrating a fifteen-page story that she has written in Spanish about a princess whose children are kidnapped from their grandmother by an evil magician and taken to the magician’s castle. The grandmother, who is a fairy, uses her crystal ball, discovers their whereabouts, and rescues them from the magician, after which they return to their mother where they live happily ever after. The story begins in this way:

Spanish: Había una vez una princesa y sus hijas una niña de tres años y la otra de cuatro años. Luego vino la mamá de la princesa. Y la princesa le dijo a su mamá que le haga el favor que le cuide las niñas cuando se vaya a trabajar.

English translation: Once upon a time there was a princess and her daughters one three years old and the other four years old. Then the princess’s mother came. And the princess asked her mother to do her a favor to take care of her children when she goes to work.

Lilia is engrossed in using thin line markers to create multi-color illustrations, and she quietly rereads each page as she decides what to draw. She has been working on the illustrations for several days.

Two weeks later, in the same room, Lilia is seated with a group of children who are listening to their classmates’ stories about events in their lives that have been particularly memorable. The stories have been written in English, the children’s second language. Lilia has a story to share about waking up in the middle of night and hurting herself. She has titled it “When I Fold Daun” (When I fell down):

Child’s version: When I was sleeping I was sleeping and samitg quek my up I sal my toy dake and I wanted to gutet and I fold en a rocken I starto cry My mom came quickly and she got me an take me to da kichen and I stop cryig and I begin to slip and my mom put my en the bed.

Standard spelling: When I was sleeping I was sleeping and something woke me up I saw my toy duck and I wanted to get it and I fell on a rocking (chair) I start to cry My mom came quickly and she got me and take me to the kitchen and I stop crying and I begin to sleep and my mom put me on the bed.

Lilia is one of a group of children that we have been working with since the fall of 1989. Through a series of longitudinal case studies, we have been investigating the literacy acquisition and development of Spanish-speaking children enrolled in a bilingual program. This particular bilingual program has a firm commitment to initial literacy acquisition in the children’s native or stronger language, as well as a strong empha-
sis on children’s original writing. The program philosophy is that biliteracy is beneficial in and of itself (it is better to be literate in two languages than in one), and that a firm foundation in language literacy (in this case, Spanish) facilitates children’s successful adding on of literacy in the second language (in this case, English). Thus, this program advocates that children spend at least three or four years in bilingual classrooms and become proficient in reading and writing Spanish before they read or write English.

Our work has meant that we have been in the children’s classrooms at least one day a week, observing the children and interacting with them during language arts time, assisting the teachers in whatever ways we are able, taking notes on classroom activities, audiotaping some of the children’s interactions during writing time, and collecting the children’s written work. We have started to analyze specific, discrete aspects of the children’s Spanish writing, such as invented spelling, segmentation, codeswitching, stylistic devices, and topic choice, so that we may compare our findings to previous research (for example, Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1981-82). However, we also have been interested in larger questions such as how the children have responded to the writing environments in their classrooms in order to become writers and how and why the children have begun to add on English writing. In this article, we address these two questions in terms of Lilia’s writing development.

**Classroom Contexts**

We met Lilia when she was a first grader, enrolled in a class team-taught by two bilingual teachers. While the children were mixed heterogeneously by language during much of the rest of the day, every morning the Spanish speakers worked together in a two hour Spanish language arts block. Their teacher for this block, Susan L., a native English speaker who had lived in Spain for fifteen years, was a woman with many years’ experience as a Montessori teacher. While her Spanish language literacy instruction in previous years had been focused on teaching children sound-letter correspondences in Spanish, she had been influenced by other teachers to learn about process approaches to writing and about promoting children’s emergent literacy through writing and the utilization of children’s literature. As a result, she had decided to incorporate writing into her first grade class, which she did by organizing a daily writing time and by encouraging the children to create original stories. Some of these she published by typing final versions of the stories in standard Spanish which the children then illustrated. Later in the year, Susan also made limited use of dialogue journals and literature logs.

In the second grade, Lilia was assigned to a self-contained classroom, which meant that the Spanish- and English-speaking children were together throughout the school day, including language arts time. The class was taught by a second year bilingual teacher, Becky J. (another native English speaker), who had spent the previous year in a basal reader dominated school. Becky was interested in breaking out of this traditional teaching and experimenting with the kinds of writing and literature study she had heard about in workshops. She began the school year by having children write daily in journals, which she and her instructional aide, Javier L., responded to. Gradually she added story writing on a daily basis. Having had no previous experience in process writing (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986), Becky encouraged the children to write and share what they had created, but she did not work with them on substantive revisions of their pieces. In the spring the children had limited opportunities to publish some stories, either by using the computer lab or by copying them by hand with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation corrected by Becky. While she used both Spanish and English throughout the school day, Becky encouraged the Spanish-speaking children to write in Spanish.

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In third grade, the children’s Spanish language arts teacher was Laura C., another native English speaker and a woman with several years’ experience in the bilingual program, but who was in her first year teaching third grade. Laura team-taught with a monolingual English teacher, Karen T., who happened to be Lilia’s homeroom teacher. Karen and her bilingual instructional assistant, Sylvia O., utilized dialogue journals during homeroom time, inviting the children to write first to either of them and later to a peer. In Laura’s language arts block, the children created their own stories. At the beginning of the year, Laura encouraged the children to work in Spanish. Later, however, since the expectation was that most of the children would exit the bilingual program at the end of third grade, she began to encourage English writing, inviting Ann P., the school’s ESL teacher, in to assist with the Spanish in creating personal narratives in English. Ann’s strategy was to work with a small group of children for a couple of weeks, helping the children
to brainstorm topics that they could write about, encouraging them in their drafting, commenting on their work in progress, and assisting them with spelling after they had finished their drafting.

Lilia’s Writing Over Time
Within these contexts, how did Lilia respond to the classroom writing activities? What interested and engaged her as she worked to become a writer in her native language? How and why did she begin to add on English writing?

From the beginning of our work with her, we viewed Lilia as an intelligent, hardworking child who was a willing participant in classroom activities and who complied with her teachers’ directions. The teachers corroborated our judgments. While she did not always respond verbally to specific classroom activities, and while she generally did not call attention to herself, Lilia was always attentive and productive. Conversations with her Spanish-speaking parents revealed that they viewed education as extremely important for their children (Lilia was the younger of two children, with a brother six years older), and that frequently they urged Lilia to do her best in school. Lilia’s mother often accompanied the class on field trips; both her parents attended parent-teacher meetings.

In Lilia’s first grade room, the desks were arranged in groups of four to six, so that children could work together and make use of each other’s expertise. Lilia sat with a small group of girls. Writing time was an occasion to socialize, to share the pictures and text they were creating, and to assist one another in figuring out how to write what they wanted to relate. After several weeks of drawing rainbows and trees and labelling them either with single words or single sentences, Lilia moved into writing short personal narratives, which she continued to do all year long. While still struggling with spelling and segmentation, she was willing to encode her messages as best she could, creating vignettes of family life, as illustrated in the following, written in March and accompanied by detailed illustrations:

Child’s version: cuando le eché lapitura y me su bi al a bo y mecono me biho aua e sta a sierno bajba ba la pitura yu le ke ri aehile pitura per mi tio e biho se tena banse

Standard Spanish: cuando le eché la pintura yo me subi al arbol y me hermano me dijo que esta haciendo bajaba la pintura yo le queria echarle pintura pero mi tio me dijo [que]se tenia [que] banarse

Learning a New Language Without Losing the Old

How to teach children English when it is their second language is the subject of much controversy. Bilingual education is seen by some as an expensive indulgence that is a root cause of new immigrants’ adjustment problems. Others argue that bilingual education is necessary for a short period of time, until students can function in the regular classroom. A third viewpoint, illustrated here by Serna and Hudelson, is that bilingual education should be extensive and thorough, allowing children to become truly literate in their native language as well as English.

Lily Wong Filmore, professor of education at the University of California at Berkeley, addresses all three points of view in a provocative article titled, “When Learning a Second Language Means Losing the First,” and a succeeding interview, both in the fall edition of Educator, a journal published by UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education. She asserts that bilingual education does not have to be costly, and offers examples of existing programs that operate without additional expense. Further, she maintains that although children can learn conversational English in a couple of years, it may take five to seven years to learn English well enough to succeed academically.

Even while children are enrolled in transitional bilingual programs, many receive little instruction or support in their native language. Thus, many children do not master English and they do not become fully literate in their native language.

What happens when immigrant children learn English very early, as early as government-sponsored pre-school programs, and receive no instructional support for their native language? Filmore reports on a “No Cost Study” which addressed this question. She found that these children do learn English well, but many stop using their native language entirely. Sadly, when the native language is the only language spoken by the parents, parent-child communication can break down completely, and with it, real contact between parent and child.

--PTL
English translation: When I threw paint, I climbed up in a tree and my brother asked me what I was doing. I put the paint down. I wanted to throw paint on my brother, but my uncle told me that he had to take a bath.

Lilia also responded to the activity of literature response journals, started in April of first grade, by using her journal to summarize plots of stories either read to the class or read by the children themselves. And she interacted with her teacher in a dialogue journal, responding to questions that the teacher put to her. All of her writing was done in Spanish. For Lilia, first grade was a time when she received her earliest opportunity and encouragement in school to express herself in writing. Lilia demonstrated her willingness to figure out how to get her ideas down on paper, to struggle with spelling and segmentation, and to participate in whatever kinds of writing activities were a part of the class. She also demonstrated her willingness to help others create their texts and to share her work with others. Lilia began to see herself as a writer.

In second grade we noticed significant differences both in Lilia’s story writing and in her response to varied writing tasks. In her journal Lilia described some of her and her family’s daily activities, generally beginning with what she did after school and ending with her going to sleep at night. These entries had the feeling of the bed-to-bed narratives Calkins (1986) has described, a listing of everything that had taken place in chronological order, the incidents strung together with the words then (después) or and (y). As the year progressed, the entries took on a formulaic quality, each entry beginning invariably with Yo fui a (I went to) and ending with después me fui a casa (then I went home). In addition, Lilia’s handwriting in the journal became increasingly sloppy and difficult to read. Our sense was that, for Lilia, the journal had become simply a task that she was supposed to accomplish. She was willing to carry out the task, but she did not have a lot of investment in it. Almost never did she respond to the comments and questions written by Becky or Javier.

In contrast, when the children engaged in story writing, Lilia was an enthusiastic and quite prolific participant. While occasionally she continued to produce personal narratives that reflected her family life, most of the stories that Lilia wrote were fantasy accounts of human or animal families. These narratives generally took the form of the typical fairy tale with the introduction of the characters, an initiating event, the conflict, and resolution of the conflict. One of her personal favorites, and a story that reveals a humorous, almost mischievous side of Lilia, was a ten-page story in which her teacher was a major character. Written in February of second grade, the story began like this:

Spanish: Había una vez una muchacha ¿Qué se llama Mis J_____. Y era bonita. Tenía 2 novios ella no podía desirir cual de los dos se Quería casar Pero ella se desidió quese casara con el chico porque es gavo, aunque quedara el mediano

English translation: Once upon a time there was a girl whose name was Ms. J. And she was pretty. She had two boyfriends and she couldn’t decide which of the two to marry. But she decided to marry the short one because he is handsome even though the medium-sized one remained.

The story continued as Ms. J. told the mediano that she could find him another girl to marry. He didn’t like that idea and he gave her a kick and told her never to return to his house. Ms. J. began to cry and told him that she was his friend. However, she still married the short, handsome boyfriend and they had a big wedding party. Then they had five children. The children grew up, after which Ms. J. and her husband died. When the children’s uncle told them of their parents’ deaths, the children were greatly saddened and they stayed sad forever.

Over the second grade year, Lilia’s writing became more like adult Spanish in orthography and segmentation.

Lilia expended significant time and energy on the creation of these stories. While the children received instructions to work by themselves on their stories, Lilia often sat with her best friend Susana, and quietly and almost surreptitiously they read their stories aloud to each other, chuckling over some of Lilia’s creations. Her stories were longer and more complete and complex than they had been in first grade, and they often included dialogue among the characters. Over the second grade year, Lilia’s writing became more like adult Spanish in orthography and segmentation. Virtually all of her second grade writing continued to be in Spanish. Lilia used her second grade experience to develop confidence as a writer and to explore her growing understanding of story.

In third grade Lilia continued to write well developed stories in Spanish, moving back and forth between personal accounts and fantasy, such as the story about the princess summarized above. Her initial forays into English writing came as she dialogued with Karen, her English-speaking homeroom teacher. Although Karen,
who spoke and read a little Spanish and who was anxious to learn more, had told the children that they could write to her or Sylvia, the aide, in Spanish. Lilia chose to write to Karen in English and to Sylvia in Spanish. Thus she followed the language choice norm for bilinguals of using the language they feel is most comfortable for their interlocutor (Grosjean, 1984). Having received no formal literacy instruction in English, Lilia used what she knew about writing in Spanish to express herself in her second language. This meant that she utilized Spanish orthography to write English. However, Lilia was in a classroom where English print was all around her, and she had been reading in English during free reading time since the middle of second grade (also without any formal instruction), so she did have some exposure to English print. Her English journal entries began to demonstrate the influences of both Spanish and English, as, for example, when in November she wrote to Karen:

Child’s version: Dear Mis T____ I gona red 20 books en ey wek en da jaos en ay querid en dir ay gat alara boks en my jaos

Standard English: Dear Ms. T____ I’m gonna read 20 books in a week in the house and I could read in there.
I got a lot of books in my house

Some of her spelling inventions (jaos for house, ay querid for I could read, ey for a) have been traced directly to the influence of Spanish on English; others (red for read, wek for week, da for the) made it clear that Lilia had some knowledge of the names of letters in the English alphabet, and that the way she pronounced words in English influenced her spelling.

Lilia wrote more in English when Ann, the ESL teacher, began to come into the classroom at language arts time. She produced several personal narratives similar to the one shared in the introduction. In contrast to her writing in Spanish, her English writing was limited to true stories about her family. Perhaps this was a function of her feeling more confident in English if she related actual experiences than if she tried to invent something. When we talked with Lilia about learning to write in English, she told us that Ann was the person who had taught her how to write in English.

We would suggest that the journal writing, carried out more privately, initiated her into taking the risk to express herself in her second language, but the more public activity of writing and sharing a story about her life was what she saw as really writing in English. By the time she finished third grade, then, Lilia had become a fluent writer in Spanish and one who viewed herself as being able also to write in English.

Conclusion
The broad outline of Lilia’s story has been evident in the other Spanish-speaking children we have been studying. All of them, encouraged by their teachers and interacting with their peers, became confident that they could express themselves in writing by writing initially in Spanish. Once they were comfortable writing in Spanish, they began to venture into English writing, some on their own, some only with encouragement from their teachers. However, their achievement of fluency in Spanish and their experimentations with English have occurred at different times and rates for different children. Certain aspects of Lilia’s story, such as what she chose to write about and her involvement in and commitment to various kinds of writing, were unique to her. All of the children, because they are unique human beings, have demonstrated individual differences in their work and in their approaches to their classroom experiences.

What Lilia and the other children have shown us is that within general patterns of writing development there are individuals who make their own ways. These ways need to be understood, respected, and appreciated. Looking closely at individual children’s classroom lives and work, we believe, is one way of developing this understanding, respect, and appreciation.

References


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