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# Read Alouds That Rock: Bilingual Storytimes

By Patricia J. Murphy | Feb 12, 2024

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Heather Tso

Elizabeth J. Isaac leading a Navajo/English storytime.

*In this recurring series, we ask literacy experts in classrooms and libraries to discuss their techniques for selecting and sharing books to lead engaging storytimes for young readers.*

In today's global society, being bilingual is not just a novelty. People of all ages are learning second, or third, languages to help expand

their minds and horizons. We spoke with three bilingual educators who are using dual language/bilingual books in their diverse classrooms and libraries for a growing list of reasons, and with a multitude of benefits.

As a child living on the Navajo reservation, **Elizabeth J. Isaac** used to hide her English books from her grandparents. Isaac said that she worried they would burn them. Her elders were concerned that she'd lose her Navajo language and culture, and leave them behind. Instead, Isaac has placed both her Navajo and English languages and cultures at the front and center of her life and her third-grade classroom's bilingual storytimes.

Many of the books she uses are from Salina Bookshelf, an independent book publisher in Flagstaff, Ariz., that specializes in publishing multicultural materials and dual language books and textbooks. These resources help in teaching the Navajo language and culture with authentic traditional and contemporary depictions of Navajo life. Isaac said that she uses these books and others as steppingstones to help her students learn more about their culture, and to introduce them to other cultures.

"With the stories in Navajo and English, my students can better understand the situations and problems in the stories, and connect with them, too," Isaac said, "When I'm reading to them, I'll often stop and speak to them in Navajo if I need to explain things. I also try to transition them from Navajo to English." Isaac said that because these books are so culturally relevant to her students, they can see themselves, connect with their Navajo background, and at the same time learn more about the English-speaking culture.

In addition to using these titles for storytimes, Isaac also plans cultural units around them to teach her students both traditional and contemporary lessons about their Navajo culture, to build their confidence in themselves, and to take greater pride in their heritage. She said all of these things help them become leaders—and readers. "Often times, my kids are excited to keep reading," Isaac said. "Some tell me that they can't wait for tomorrow to see what happens next in these stories."

Thanks to the Salina Bookshelf, the kids don't have to wait to read the books. Not only has the publisher donated books to Isaac's students, thereby increasing their book ownership, the school is hosting literacy nights to introduce parents to the bilingual books, demonstrate their value, and encourage the whole family to read together.

Isaac is thrilled to see that parents are supporting these literacy efforts and accepting both Navajo and English languages into their homes. She is already seeing many benefits in her students, and is hopeful for their futures. "The books are helping them to learn and to feel good about their culture—and to accept and learn more about the English-speaking cultures, too," Isaac said. "I believe the books are giving them a cultural basis to grow, change, learn—and lead. And, while they're doing this, they'll carry their Navajo culture with them."



*Melissa Mendieta*

Liana Pupo-Cuartas brings an added element of fun to her Spanish/English storytime.

**Liana Pupo-Cuartas** has always loved doing storytimes: the sillier, funnier, and more inclusive, the better. It's why (and how) she runs the South Dade Regional Library's toddler and bilingual storytimes in the Miami-Dade Public Library System. While the toddler crowd bubbles over with babies, toddlers, and their parents/caregivers, her family bilingual storytime on Monday evenings also has an impressive following of parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, babies, toddlers, and kids up to 12 years old. Certainly, a storytime group with this size and age span could pose a challenge for most librarians, but not for Pupo-Cuartas.

As her family bilingual storytime guests arrive, she quickly sizes up the group and reads the room as she proceeds to tailor her programming to her audience. "Before I begin, I normally do our opening or "Hello" song," Pupo-Cuartas said. "Then, I'll usually read a few books and sing some songs with them to get a feel for the group's ages, attention spans, and interest levels."

She often curates a selection of books around a singular theme, using a wide variety of engaging picture books, and teaches and translates English/Spanish words within the context of the stories.

“For example, if my theme is rainbows, I will translate the colors, and have them repeat them back to me,” Pupo-Cuartas said. “We did the same thing with animals in animal books, etc.” Sometimes, Pupo-Cuartas may use books that include both languages, but she said that they are often longer and sometimes difficult to read aloud.

Other times, Pupo-Cuartas might focus a few minutes on early literacy skills if she notices a particular need. Recently, she’s been helping the younger storytime attendees identify the letters of the alphabet with a game using the letters on the rug. “Our goal at storytime is for the English and Spanish speakers to learn a different language—even if it’s just a couple of words here and there.”

Her efforts are making a real difference. “The other day, a storytime friend came up to me when I was cleaning up. And, when I said, “Gracias!” Pupo-Cuartas said, “she repeated *gracias*, and then she said, ‘You know, I learned three new Spanish words today— *gracias*, *roja* (red), and *morado* (purple)!’ and she smiled.”

Smiles were everywhere during the storytime’s special celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, and so were hands in the air wanting to share. “We read the book *Pepé and the Parade*, written by Tracey Kyle and illustrated by Mirelle Ortega, that talks about many Hispanic countries and the unique dishes that some may have at home. The kids enjoyed talking about their countries and their favorite meals.”

The kids also enjoy when Pupo-Cuartas switches gears and pulls out shakers to use with songs, blocks to build with, and a parachute to raise up and down. She may even ask the older kids to read books to the younger ones. And, while the storytime is mostly focused on learning English and Spanish, it’s always about the children and what they want to do.

To end the storytime, Pupo-Cuartas and the regulars will start singing the Spanish version of “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” with the motions, the others will join in, and then they’ll say their goodbyes. But not without making plans to meet again at the next storytime. The storytime has become a valued and treasured community for each of its members. “We want all of our kids and families to feel that they’re included in everything we do,” Pupo-Cuartas said, “and all are welcome, whatever language they speak!”

**Sharon Pao** immigrated to the U.S. from her community in Taiwan more than 40 years ago with her children who were one, five, and eight years old at the time. She found the library to be the place she and her children could find a space to belong and to immerse themselves in the books and language of their new country. “At a young age, kids pick up language more easily than adults,” Pao said. “I saw this with my own family. I watched how they learned English while I tried to keep using the Chinese language at home for them. I think it’s beneficial for kids to know another language.”

When her kids were older, Pao decided to help other families learn languages at the library. “I think one of the best things in this country is the public library,” Pao said. “So, I decided to go to library school and get my MLS.” Shortly after, she joined the San Jose Public Library System, and worked there for 18 years.

But 10 years after retiring from the library, Pao returned to become an extra help librarian and host the monthly Mandarin/English story times at the Saratoga Community Library in Santa Clara County, Calif.

“Back when I first did storytimes as a full-time librarian, the neighborhood had a high percentage of Mandarin-speaking residents and families with preschoolers and toddlers, so we thought a



Tina Pao

Sharon Pao shares a Mandarin/English book with her students.

bilingual storytime would make families feel more comfortable and enjoy using the library and reading books,” Pao said. “And, for children who don’t speak Mandarin at home, the goal was to provide exposure to the sounds and tones, rhythms, and even shapes of the characters of the language.”

Today, Pao’s popular monthly storytimes may have different faces, but the objectives are the same: to engage toddlers from families that speak Mandarin in their households, and English-speaking toddlers whose parents want to expose them to Mandarin. The materials and resources, however, have also changed a bit. “In the past, I had to translate and collect a number of stories, children’s songs, and finger plays in Mandarin to use during storytime. These days, however, there are many more age-appropriate bilingual picture books being published and available in our collection.”

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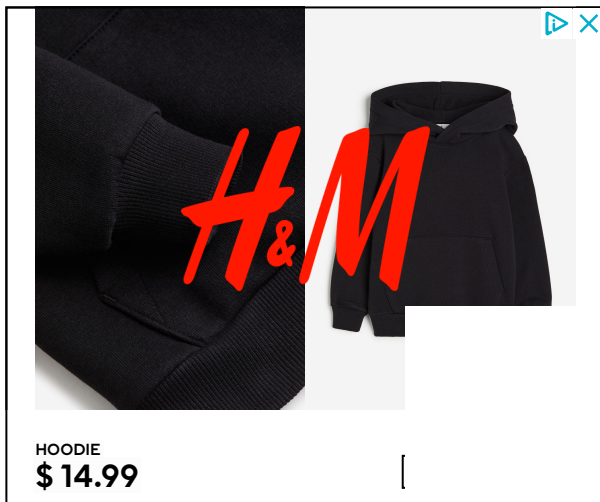
With each story time, she chooses books “with simple, well-defined illustrations and stories,” incorporates props including a stuffed panda named Ling Ling, handmade puppets, and flannel boards to pair the words with visuals for multi-sensory benefits. She also uses the whiteboard to demonstrate writing the characters of the Chinese language, too. Pao often chooses a theme, such as last month’s “Cloud Story,” when they read *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles G. Shaw, *Little Cloud* by Eric Carle, and *The Police Cloud* by Christoph Niemann. This month’s theme will be “Sweaters.”

“Sometimes, I’ll read books going back and forth in the two languages—and tell the kids which language I’m speaking,” Pao said. “Other times, I may read one language at a time throughout the storytime. I might also grab key words and/or phrases for them to hear and to repeat in Mandarin and English. We might read and do actions, too.”

With everything Pao does, she has high hopes for her storytime guests. “Like my fellow librarians, I prepare these storytimes with the intention that kids will pick up some of the language, learn language skills, enjoy listening to stories—and that books, reading, and libraries will become an essential part of their lives as they grow up!” she said.

Pao also hopes that the children have fun, get to know each other, fall in love with books and the library, and learn a new language just like she and her kids did many years ago. “Learning another language enriches your life. It gives you confidence and makes your life bigger—and richer. It’s a blessing for life!”

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