

# Translanguaging and Latinx Bilingual Readers

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Texts may be written in English or Spanish, but are Latinx bilinguals reading in English and/or Spanish?

Latinx bilingual reading is as complex as the Latinx community. Paco (all student and teacher names are pseudonyms), a 3-year-old born in the United States, is growing up in a bilingual home. His parents read to him sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish. Arturo, a fourth grader, was also born in the United States after his parents emigrated from Puebla, Mexico. He is in a dual-language bilingual classroom, where he is expected to read texts in English as well as in Spanish. Yamaira, who was born in the Dominican Republic and arrived in New York City at the age of 9, is in a seventh-grade history class where instruction is in English, as is the classroom textbook.

The question for reading teachers and researchers is, In which language is reading taking place for Paco, Arturo, and Yamaira? Or, rather, how are Paco, Arturo, and Yamaira reading themselves in the texts with which they are engaging?

In this article, I argue that the act of reading does not depend on the language of the written text or even on the concept of a named language such as English or Spanish. Rather, the act of reading is about readers assembling all their meaning-making resources and acting on them to read themselves.

Texts may be said to be in English or in Spanish, but bilingual Latinx readers do not read in English or in Spanish; nor do they read in English *and* Spanish. The linguistic repertoire of a bilingual is not simply the sum of a separate construct named English and a separate one named Spanish. Yes, English and Spanish are important sociopolitical linguistic constructs that have important impacts on the lives of people who culturally and historically identify with those languages. However, bilinguals do language with a unitary linguistic repertoire that does not reflect dual, separate linguistic systems or have a dual psycholinguistic correspondence (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, 2018); that is, bilinguals engage in translanguaging (García & Li, 2014).

## A Translanguaging View of Literacy

Translanguaging focuses on the unbounded and agentive dynamic actions of bilinguals as they use their entire linguistic/multimodal repertoire. Bilingual readers leverage all of their meaning-making resources and all of themselves as they engage with text. Some of these resources are linguistic and verbal; others are visual; others involve gestures, the body, as well as the lives and knowledge systems with which speakers have engaged (García & Kleifgen, 2019).

These resources are not equitably distributed in the population, and they are also not equally valued in society and schools. For example, in U.S. schools, English is valued more than Spanish. Almost exclusively, English is the language of the tests and texts. The verbal, especially its written mode, is also privileged over the visual or gestural among meaning-making systems. Furthermore, white middle-class English-speaking students are positioned vis-à-vis school tests and texts in ways that privilege them because the authors of those texts most often share the same socio-historical cultural legacies, as well as the same ways of using language.

Most teachers in U.S. schools see their instruction as being in English, and sometimes in Spanish or a language other than English. In this, most teachers reveal their monolingual view of literacy, insisting that the acts of literacy need to be performed in either one language or the other. Teachers also have a monoglossic view of literacy, as if the language of the school text is static and contains the only linguistic features that are valid.

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Translanguaging moves beyond the language of the text itself to focus on the language of the person; that is, on the actions of bilinguals as they engage with the text. Although the text they are reading at the moment may be in English or in Spanish, bilingual readers always assemble all their available meaning-making resources. Thus, even though the teacher, in what she or he imagines is an English-language classroom, may be viewing instruction only through English and restricting other languages, bilingual students need to orchestrate, and are in fact orchestrating, all their multilingual/multimodal resources in the act of reading a text.

Bilingual teachers also imagine reading in English and another language as completely separate acts. Thus, books for reading are stored in different bins according to language. The time to read English is kept separate from the time to read the additional language. All literacy acts, whether listening, speaking, reading, or writing, are expected to be in one and the same language, following the language of the text.

A translanguaging view of literacy disrupts this monolingual/monoglossic imagination. Translanguaging focuses attention toward the real action of bilingual readers with their full semiotic repertoire and away from what is perceived to be the monolingual/monoglossic language of the text (see Table 1).

## Translanguaging and Reading Among Latinx Bilinguals

Latinx bilingual students are usually found to lag behind their white counterparts in reading tests. But

in those tests, Latinx bilinguals are assessed using less than half of their linguistic repertoire, whereas white middle-class monolingual students are allowed to access almost their entire one. The comparison between the reading of white middle-class monolingual students and Latinx bilingual readers in ways that restrict their translanguaging is precisely what produces Latinx reading failure.

Because the focus of translanguaging is on the actions of Latinx bilingual readers using their full linguistic repertoire, “without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages” (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 283), a translanguaging literacy perspective has the potential to reposition Latinx bilinguals as competent readers, regardless of their proficiency in English or in Spanish.

The meaning-making repertoire of Latinx bilinguals does not fall squarely within the linguistic boundaries established in English monolingual or even in English-Spanish bilingual classrooms. Anzaldúa (1987) referred to the space in which bilingual Latinx live and communicate as the borderlands, a historically, culturally, and linguistically in-between space. Bilinguals live and read themselves in what Li Wei (2011) has called a translanguaging space, a space that lacks clear boundaries, culturally or linguistically. However, schools and educators seldom enter this translanguaging space with their Latinx readers.

What would happen if literacy educators entered into this translanguaging space with their Latinx bilingual students?

**Table 1**  
**Two Literacy Perspectives**

Essential questions	Monolingual/monoglossic perspective of literacy	Translanguaging perspective of literacy
What is the focus of reading education?	The monolingual text	The bilingual student
How is literacy developed?	As cognitive enterprise of skill building in one named language	As a complexity of actions that depend on varying social, cultural, political, and economic contexts
What constitutes a literacy/biliteracy performance?	Ability to read in one language (or in two separate languages in biliteracy) without any interference from the additional language	Ability to bring the whole self and the entire language repertoire into the reading performance, regardless of language of text
What is the role of the verbal and written language in the development of literacy?	The only resource that counts	An important resource, but multimodal resources and life experience are equally important

## Entering the Translanguaging Literacy Space With Latinx Bilinguals

In turning attention from the language of the texts to the languaging of the bilingual readers (note the shift from the noun, *language*, to the verb, *languaging*), it becomes clear that bilingual readers' actions are not limited or inferior to those of others. It is educators who have been limited in how they view literacy and have produced the failures of Latinx readers. With this in mind, I now invite readers of this article to enter the translanguaging space with three Latinx bilingual readers: Paco, Arturo, and Yamaira.

### **Paco, Pre-Reading in a Bilingual Home**

I start with Paco, the 3-year-old bilingual child whose mother is a U.S.-born Latina woman and whose father is a U.S.-born white man. The mother grew up in a bilingual home, the father in a monolingual one, but he studied Spanish in high school. The family is comfortable in a translanguaging space, where their use of English and Spanish is unbounded, dynamic, and fluid and adapts to meet the communicative expectations of the many different people who enter the home.

The mother and father have a bedtime reading routine, and there are books in Spanish as well as English. The books in Paco's bookcase are varied. Some are fantasy, and others are books about rockets that interest Paco; some are picture books, others word books, and still others storybooks. Generally, it is the father who reads to Paco at bedtime, but Paco is allowed to choose the book that he wants to read. Often, Paco owns the same book in English and in Spanish. That is the case, for example, of *Curious George/Jorge el curioso* by H.A. Rey.

One day at breakfast, Paco picks up *Jorge el curioso* and declares that he is going to "read" out loud to his mother and bilingual abuela. He knows that it is the Spanish-language text (the pictures are different), so he starts out his "reading" in what some might say is Spanish. However, observing Paco in the act of reading and turning the page, without imagining this to be a Spanish text, shows that he goes beyond any "named" language as he engages in translanguaging to tell the stories of *Curious George/Jorge el curioso* that have been read to him. He reads,

Con el—con el—hat. Y después se quitó el hat. Y después se ponió el hat y se fue en un bote. [Paco makes a snoring sound.] Y después, Wee-oow, wee-oow! [Paco

makes the sound of a siren.] Ahí están los bomberos. Y se cayó Curious George! Whoops! Y se descapó Curious George. Y después voló con los bulunes. [Paco raises his arm and waves his hand upward.]

When he finishes "reading" the book, his mother and abuela applaud. In this safe translanguaging space, Paco is not told that in "Spanish," one does not say *bulunes* but *globos*, or that *hat* is *sombrero*, or that *descapó* should be *escapó*. He is also not told that he should refer to the character as *Jorge el curioso* because the book is in Spanish. Additionally, Paco is celebrated for using his body, his hands, and his sounds: "ghg, ghg, ghg" (snoring), "wee-oow, wee-oow!" (a siren), raised arm and hand movement, and saying "Whoops!" He is developing pride in his bilingual and multimodal performances.

This pre-reader is being encouraged to enter into reading with all his available repertoire. Translanguaging enables him to read "in Spanish" and to feel proud of this accomplishment. In the school space, however, teachers are often dismissive of the translanguaging practices of bilinguals, rendering them incomplete, wrong, full of errors. The result is that bilingual readers fall through the linguistic cracks that are opened up artificially between their two languages.

Note that Paco was aware of "the language" of the text and that he is proud to be bilingual (he likes to say "yo soy bilingüe" and likes to listen to what he calls bilingüe songs), but this does not limit his own language, which falls outside of the linguistic boundaries that schools and society create.

Most educators never open up a translanguaging space so that bilingual children can read themselves fully, as they do at home. This happens often even in dual-language bilingual classrooms, where the goal is supposed to be bilingualism and biliteracy.

### **Arturo, Reading in a Fourth-Grade Dual-Language Bilingual Classroom**

Arturo is in a dual-language fourth-grade bilingual classroom in which one day, and with one teacher, English is the language of instruction, and where the next day, with another teacher, the language of instruction is Spanish. At home, his parents, both born in Mexico, speak mostly Spanish, although Arturo speaks mostly English with his siblings. The household then provides Arturo with a safe translanguaging space, and Arturo's parents are happy that he is bilingual and are very enthusiastic that he is in a dual-language bilingual classroom.

However, Arturo is failing as a reader in both English and Spanish. Ms. Stewart, Arturo's English teacher, views him as a disengaged reader, not making progress, and not having the English vocabulary to engage with the chapter books that they are reading. Arturo is placed in the group with the lowest reading level. The stories they read are not complex, and the work in the group is mostly about vocabulary buildup. Ms. Stewart blames Arturo's slow progress on his Spanish. Similarly, Ms. Medina, Arturo's Spanish teacher, believes that he does not have sufficient Spanish-language vocabulary to make sense of the Spanish-language chapter books. For Ms. Medina, raised and educated in Colombia through university, Arturo's Spanish is simply deficient.

After attending a workshop on translanguaging and dislodging many of their traditional views about language and bilingualism, Ms. Stewart and Ms. Medina decide to open up a translanguaging space within their reading blocks. They realize that they have been evaluating Arturo's English and Spanish reading, not Arturo as a reader. They cannot change the school's language policy of one day of instruction in English and one day in Spanish, but they can and do begin to transform their views of bilingual literacy and how they can best develop it.

The teachers choose chapter books that have an English and a Spanish version. They also select books that engage with issues of critical importance to the Latinx community. During the read-aloud, the same book is read one day in English, and the story is continued the next day in Spanish. The teachers allow students to participate in the discussion of the read-aloud using all their meaning-making resources.

Ms. Stewart and Ms. Medina encourage acting out the scene, drawing the scene, putting music to the scene, and using English or Spanish, regardless of what is called "the language of the day." Ms. Stewart, who is monolingual, often finds herself asking students to translate what they say in Spanish for her, an extension of the strategy she uses when she cannot make sense of students' acting performances or their drawings.

After the read-aloud, students return to their groups to discuss an issue that has been raised during the reading. However, the groups are now constituted by students who are at different levels of reading and whose bilingualism falls at different points along the continuum—some are more comfortable performing as readers in English, and others in Spanish.

At their tables, the students have copies of the text they are reading in the language other than that of the instructional day. They also have iPads and dictionaries. They are encouraged to use all the resources at their disposal, including their peers, their other language, and their iPads and available texts, to engage in a deep discussion of what they are reading.

This group work enables Ms. Stewart and Ms. Medina to start hearing their students as bilingual readers, rather than as readers of English and/or Spanish. They start shifting the questions they raise about Arturo, focusing on him as a person and learner:

- How does Arturo go about engaging with the text? How is he physically positioned? What are his gestures? What are the emotions he displays?
- What is Arturo interested in?
- How does he connect with the peers in his group?

After they get a fuller picture of Arturo as a person, they start focusing on Arturo as a reader:

- Is he able to identify key ideas?
- Does he make inferences?
- Can he express complex thoughts?
- Does he associate ideas from multiple texts?
- Can he argue effectively and persuade his classmates?

The questions they raise are no longer about the words he uses and how he uses them. The teachers stop listening to Arturo's English and Spanish, and instead, they start to listen to Arturo as a reader.

One day, the students are working with Julia Alvarez's novel *How Tía Lola Came to (Visit) Stay/ Cuando la Tía Lola vino (de visita) a quedarse*. On an "English day," a girl in Arturo's group expresses dismay about the tía staying and says, "Of course she can't stay." Arturo immediately raises his voice and exclaims,

¡Que eso no pasa con los mexicanos! We always welcome family! Porque la familia, con razón y sin ella, says mi mamá. That's what familia is for. Haven't you seen Coco? [starts singing] And the world is mi familia!...Everyone, bienvenido!

Arturo has been encouraged to bring all of himself into the text, with his background knowledge,



which includes his translanguaging, so he emerges as a competent reader in this group. His engagement with texts in one language or the other increases as he makes texts his own and is enabled to read with his whole self, instead of only with one part of his language repertoire.

Ms. Stewart and Ms. Medina start noticing that it is not language and vocabulary that Arturo lacks. In fact, they comment that he has a more complex and extended vocabulary than many in the class. They realize that he has been lacking opportunities to leverage all his translanguaging to make meaning when he reads. The lack is not Arturo's; it is the school's, and the educators' misunderstanding about the language of bilinguals, about translanguaging.

### ***Yamaira, Reading History in Seventh Grade***

Yamaira is a 12-year-old girl who arrived from the Dominican Republic three years ago and has just entered seventh grade. Her history class is in English, and English is the language of the textbook. Yamaira is fortunate that her teacher, Ms. López, having lived as a Latinx bilingual all her life, has experience with her own translanguaging.

Yamaira complains to Ms. López that she does not understand the history textbook because it is written in advanced English, but she is curious and wants to know more. Ms. López understands that Yamaira cannot fully comprehend the history textbook if she accesses it only in English, so she enters Yamaira's translanguaging space and encourages her to be comfortable in that space, even though the history text and the class is in "English."

Yamaira shares that she is very interested in the discussion they had in class about Christopher Columbus's encounter with the Taínos. She was surprised by the reading, which interpreted the encounter as an invasion of the Arawak-speaking people in the Caribbean. She tells her teacher that this is very different from what she had been taught—Christopher Columbus's discovery.

Ms. López begins to understand that Yamaira has an inquisitive historical mind, even though she is struggling with reading the textbook. She gives her two primary documents, written in Spanish, and asks her to read them for the following week. She also assures Yamaira that she will not be evaluated on her knowledge of English, but on her knowledge of history.

Yamaira comes into Ms. López's class the following week, excited about what she has learned from the primary sources, which she has read in Spanish.

She privately tells Ms. López that now she understands the English-language textbook much better.

Ms. López shows Yamaira some other strategies to bring her translanguaging abilities to bear on her reading of the English textbook. For example, Ms. López explains to Yamaira how to annotate the text, writing in Spanish in the margin or on sticky notes her interpretation of an idea or even the meaning of words. She also tells Yamaira not to be afraid to use Google Translate when she does not understand something in the text. Ms. López also advises Yamaira to read about the topic on the internet in Spanish before reading the English-language textbook.

During class, Ms. López makes sure that Yamaira's discussion group dealing with the English material includes other Spanish-speaking students. She encourages Yamaira not only to ask her classmates in Spanish any questions she might have about the text but also to share what she has learned from the primary documents or other readings in Spanish she has done at home. When this occurs, Yamaira's Spanish-speaking classmates translate for others in the group.

Yamaira's group then reports on their discussion to the whole class. They tell them about the additional information that Yamaira found when reading the primary documents and other sources in Spanish. Yamaira's reading then becomes the expert reading in the class. For Yamaira, this is a very different experience. The reading of academic texts in English had always resulted in failure before.

Ms. López respects Yamaira's translanguaging space and acknowledges that even though the class is officially in English, Yamaira has opened a translanguaging space that has transformed the class. Latinx bilinguals, who make up 75% of this middle school, have begun to understand that their translanguaging is a resource, not a hindrance, for reading deeply about history and other content. This understanding is also now also available to students who speak languages other than English and Spanish, as well as to African American students. The class begins to understand that the way they use language and what they know is most important in making sense of reading any text.

Without Ms. López's stance about translanguaging, Yamaira would have never engaged with her passion for history. Likewise, the other students would not have had permission to bring their whole selves—linguistically, culturally, historically, and politically—into the act of reading history.

## Conclusion

The ways that scholars have viewed bilingualism in the past, as two separate autonomous languages, has prevented educators from viewing the literacy of bilingual students in terms other than monolingual and monoglossic. A translanguaging literacy perspective enables taking the perspective of the action on the text by a bilingual reader whose language goes beyond national and institutional boundaries, and certainly beyond the particular language or verbal aspects of the text.

The monolingual text with supposedly static linguistic features is transformed and mobilized by bilingual readers who bring their entire selves—their language, with its multilingualism and multimodalities; their emotions; their bodies; and their lives—into the text. If educators would only enter the translanguaging space in which bilingual readers act, it is possible that Latinx bilingual students could become educationally repositioned as successful readers. This, in turn, has the potential to also reposition them socially and politically. Contrary to

what the poet Antonio Machado said: *Caminante, sí hay camino*. However, finding and walking the path requires not fencing off bilingual students' language but liberating it fully, as it follows its unbounded, dynamic, and fluid translanguaging corriente.

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