



Literacy Squared®
Statement on the Teaching of Phonics in Paired Literacy Programs
July 2020

Our Literacy Squared team is frequently asked to weigh in on decisions regarding the teaching of literacy in various models of bilingual/dual language programs. Our position over the past 15 years has been consistent, the mission of Literacy Squared is to further the development of instructional programs that develop bilingualism/biliteracy in Spanish and English. We posit that biliteracy is a higher form of literacy than monoliteracy and phonics has an important but **limited** role in developing biliteracy. Literacy Squared research has focused on the creation of programs and practices that have the development of biliteracy as their major goal. Biliteracy demands that we consider the role of phonics instruction in Spanish, in English and in ways that develop cross-language connections. To achieve this goal requires continuous examination of quality instructional programs and practices that are based on sound biliterate pedagogy.

Given the renewed national interest in the teaching of phonics in monolingual English reading programs (Getting Reading Right, 2020; Shanahan, 2019), we have been repeatedly asked to take a stand on the teaching of phonics in Literacy Squared programs and other programs where children are learning to read and write in two languages. The following paragraphs present and discuss Literacy Squared's stance on the teaching of phonics in programs where paired literacy instruction is implemented.

It has always been the position of Literacy Squared that the teaching of phonics is one of several methods to teach literacy in alphabetic languages that are part to whole in orientation. We define phonics as a method of teaching people to read by correlating sounds with letters or groups of letters in an alphabetic writing system. Phonics is one of several part to whole methods. Firth (1985) identified three ways to experience print that include the logographic, the orthographic and the alphabetic. The alphabetic is the nearest to what is currently termed phonics. We believe that the teaching of phonics should include all three entrees to print and we briefly define each below.

Literacy development begins with logographic reading where a child acquires a small sight vocabulary of written words. These words are usually words that are meaningful and have been presented visually many times. The act of reading to and reading with provides students with the logographic experience. Sight word recognition is likely the first way a child learns to read. It is usually words that have significant meaning to them and that they see often. Examples of this would be their name and names of loved ones or things they like or visit. Environmental print is a way to direct children's attention to words, how print conveys meaning and how it has a functional purpose. Examples are Dairy Queen, Dora; Transformers; K-Mart, Mickey Mouse, etc. In teaching students to read and write we must make sure we are providing students with opportunities to expose them to high utility words in meaningful settings so that students begin to recognize these words automatically. As we develop biliteracy we need to do this in both Spanish and English and we need to be clear that there is a difference between high frequency (sight) words in Spanish and English. In English, high frequency words are words that occur with great frequency in the texts but are not phonetically regular. In Spanish, high frequency words (*golpe de vista*) are words that are high utility but also phonetically regular. In both languages, knowledge of high frequency sight words increases reading fluency.

The orthographic is often referred to as learning patterns in words or how words work. It is a method to teach students how to use word knowledge strategically to support the learning of spelling, to help decode unfamiliar words while reading, and to learn vocabulary. Word work is designed to build language and comprehension skills and develop metalinguistic awareness (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston,



2000). We emphasize that methods of teaching word work must be authentic to the language of instruction and therefore are not always the same in Spanish and English. Importantly, Spanish has a more transparent orthographic system than English. In another example, in English word families most often are taught via teaching on-set and rime patterns (e.g. at, cat, mat, bat, cat), the root word (in this case the root word (at) is a phonological root). In contrast, in Spanish, word families are taught by using semantic roots (e.g. zapato, zapatería, zapater; flor, florería, florero).

The third way to experience print is the alphabetic. The alphabetic methodology is hearing sounds of the language and relating them to a graphic symbol. When students come to a word they don't know, in reading or writing, they use the letter-sound(s)/sound-letter(s) to decode the unknown word. The alphabetic method involves hearing sounds, matching a graphic symbol to a sound and learning to decode words in reading and writing using this strategy. This method is used in both Spanish and English, however, teaching the conceptual process is different. We emphasize that teachers need to use the method that is authentic to the language being taught. We also emphasize that this method is best practiced and learned within a meaningful context of text.

While the utilization of the alphabetic experiences to learn to read and write most closely align with the current focus on phonics teaching, we reiterate that the use of logographic, orthographic and alphabetic experiences to teach children to read and write in Spanish and English are all important components of (bi)literacy teaching and learning. We further emphasize that the most effective early literacy programs put meaning at the center of teaching biliteracy. In addition to methods to experience print, a comprehensive biliteracy program consists of equal parts of oracy, reading, writing and metalinguistic development (see Escamilla, Hopewell, Butvilofsky, Sparrow, Soltero-González, Ruiz-Figueroa & Escamilla, 2014). While the teaching of phonics has a place in paired literacy instruction, it should be kept in its place and in proper perspective.

As a part of this statement, it is important to distinguish a biliteracy approach such as Literacy Squared from the monolingual English literacy programs that are the focus of the current Science of Reading. Literacy Squared was developed in 2005 as a paired literacy program whose intended audience was Spanish speaking Latino children who enter U.S. schools as simultaneous bilinguals (children who know both Spanish and English upon entry into the school). In particular, these are children who have not been served well by monolingual English literacy practices of the past, most notably monolingual English programs with heavy emphasis on teaching decoding (Butvilofsky, Escamilla, Gumina, & Silva, 2020). Paired literacy instruction in Literacy Squared is defined as, "A holistic approach to teaching reading and writing where students learn to read and write in two languages simultaneously beginning in kindergarten. Paired literacy practices are not duplicative and do not involve concurrent translation" (Escamilla et. al., 2014, p. 185). Within the context of paired literacy in Literacy Squared, children learn phonics and initial decoding skills in Spanish first. Our position is that the teaching of phonics in Spanish should represent authentic practices in the teaching of Spanish reading and should not be mere translations of English phonics practices into Spanish. Further, our program adheres to the theoretical notion that children only learn to read once and what they know about reading in one language can and should be used in service to learning to read in additional languages. In the literature, this theory is commonly referred to as transfer theory (Cummins, 2008); however, we believe that emerging bilingual children, particularly simultaneous emerging bilingual children, are not simply transferring what they know from one language to another but are using two languages to develop metalinguistic awareness and to develop an integrated biliteracy system (Hopewell & Escamilla, 2019; Garcia, 2011).



The statements above are meant to set a context for the Literacy Squared position on the teaching of phonics. As stated above, Literacy Squared paired literacy programs believe that the teaching of phonics is important in both Spanish and English, but we place heavy emphasis in kindergarten in the teaching of phonics in Spanish. The focus for teaching phonics starts in kindergarten and moves through 1st grade. During this time, students learn “the process of decoding”, which involves hearing sounds of language, matching sounds to symbols, and going across a word to read (it also involves experiencing print through logographic and orthographic methods as well as alphabetic). In Spanish, through reciprocity, writing serves as a means to solidify this process. In Literacy Squared, this conceptual process is learned in Spanish. As children grasp the process, teachers begin to model and demonstrate how it is applied in English, focusing on the similarities. We also place heavy emphasis on the development of oracy as a good foundation to ensure that comprehension is not lost or sacrificed as children are learning to decode. We also insist that children see text as they are learning oracy so that they learn the concept that the word is a unit of meaning and the purpose of decoding is not only to figure out how to put sounds and letters together but to put sounds and letters together to make words and most importantly that words have meaning. We agree with the premise of the simple view of reading that posits that reading comprehension is a product of decoding plus language comprehension (see www.edweek.org/go/reading-series or Shanahan, 2019 for a more in-depth look at the need to ensure that comprehension and oracy are parts of comprehensive reading programs).

In Literacy Squared, when children are exposed to phonics in English the teaching of phonics is **not** re-teaching, rather it is teaching what is different between Spanish and English which we term the development of cross-language metalinguistic awareness. To assist teachers in understanding these concepts and teaching practices, Literacy Squared has developed a 6-part series of webinars to illustrate this approach to phonics teaching in kindergarten and 1st grades. These are available on the Literacy Squared web-site in the section on resources (www.literacysquared.org).

We reiterate that the teaching of phonics in Spanish should be done in ways that are authentic to the language (see for example the reading materials on the Literacy Squared web-site from the Secretaría de Educación Pública referred to as SEP Libros de Alumnos Grades 1-6; see also the Spanish Common Core - Commoncore-español.sdoe.net, Estrellita (estrellita.com) and Esperanza (valleyspeech.org)). In the second semester of kindergarten, teachers may also think about phonics teaching in English but beginning with **similarities and salient differences across languages**. In kindergarten, it is important to note the critical role that oral language development (specifically oracy) plays in the later teaching of phonics. This is true in both Spanish and English. With regard to the explicit teaching of reading, kindergarten teachers could emphasize that Spanish and English share an alphabetic principle, have left to right directionality and have some letters that share sounds (e.g. m, l, t, d, s). Given that these skills have been taught first in Spanish, they can be applied and reinforced in English. Again we emphasize that this cross-language development of metalanguage applies to all literacy elements; phonics being one of them and that all of these skills are best taught in the context of reading texts and not in decontextualized ways.

In first grade, phonics teaching in English could then begin to solidify the children’s awareness of the similarities and differences between Spanish and English. For example, the letter i in Spanish sounds like the long e in English. Once children have developed strong oracy skills using text to facilitate this development and understand concepts of words, letters, syllables etc., they can and should be able to do the same in English. To illustrate, we know that in English 63% of words are made up of short vowels. This is why once children learn the “basic phonics” (sounds/letters, directionality, etc.) they can begin to learn the English principles of pattern such as onset/rime. While we know that all children and all schools are different, we



might anticipate that this would occur in the 2nd half of first grade. The point is that we need to continue with word work in both languages making those cross-language connections through explicit teaching.

The focus on Spanish alphabetic strategies begins to diminish as orthographic strategies become the focus. This is where the work is for us as biliteracy teachers. At the end of 1st grade, the focus of teaching phonics moves to teaching orthographic patterns that carry meaning such as word families. These patterns occur in both Spanish and English. It is important in Literacy Squared, to continue the teaching of these meta-linguistic rules and patterns while explicitly teaching the similarities and differences. As students continue to become literate in two-languages, students will be able to access vocabulary in both languages as they learn to make these cross-language connections. As a general rule, we suggest that the teaching of alphabetic strategies (phonics) in Spanish finishes at the end of first grade, while the teaching of cross-language connections via phonics and other metalinguistic strategies likely will continue through second and possibly into third grade.

The purpose of this statement was to highlight the Literacy Squared position on the Science of Reading debate that is currently so ubiquitous in educational circles and policy debates about literacy instruction in the U.S. In this statement we take no position on the Science of Reading per se, other than to emphasize that this debate is focused on the teaching of monolingual English children. While we understand that we can learn from this research, we also must emphatically reiterate that monolingual methods historically have been ineffective with emerging bilingual learners and if our goal is to develop biliteracy in Spanish and English, we must develop a new pedagogy unique to emerging bilingual learners and in ways that incorporate and respect the integrity of both Spanish and English methodologies and are tailored to the specific contexts in which children are becoming biliterate.

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