

Promoting Language and Cultural Diversity with Dual Language Books

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of speakers of languages other than English among 5-17 year olds in the U.S. increased from 3.8M to 9.5M, while those classified as “English Language Learners” increased from 1.3M to 2.9M (1979-2000).

At the same time, an increasing body of research demonstrates the importance of helping children build literacy in their home language. Many literacy skills transfer from one language to the other, and children will learn to read, write and speak a second language better if they have a strong foundation in their first language.

There has also been a growing recognition that parental involvement significantly impacts children’s language acquisition, especially if the parents provide their children with a high quality literacy environment from an early age. This, in turn, leads to the best practice that encourages parents to read and speak with kids using their strongest language.

Many educators find it difficult to secure resources that can help their students maintain their home language and encourage home literacy and parental involvement. Bilingual books and CDs are a wonderful resource to help meet the challenge. Such books have text in two languages (usually English and the student’s home language) on each page. The following points outline some of the key benefits of dual-language resources:

Bilingual books promote the maintenance of home languages. They encourage bilingual children to read in their home language. Teachers can lend the books to children to take home, and many schools have built bilingual classroom libraries for this purpose. Bilingual staff and parents also can read to children in class or make audiotapes for the students. This is a great way to get parents involved in their children’s education. Conducting bilingual “read-alouds” is also a wonderful way to incorporate diversity in the classroom.

The books make students and families from non-English households feel more welcome. Bilingual books allow families to see/read familiar texts, which can show a respect for their culture. The children will also feel proud to share their culture or see it reflected in the classroom. In some cases the stories may relate to their country, while other books have themes that encourage an acceptance of “being different”.

Dual-language books provide an excellent opportunity to expand the minds of all children. Bilingual books help teachers introduce the entire class to new languages and stories. They also offer a springboard to educate students about different cultures and traditions. Dual-language stories that help children appreciate and welcome diversity are available and can be particularly useful in diverse classroom settings.

While much more needs to be done to maximize the educational experience of language learners, dual-language materials are excellent resources for supporting the maintenance of home languages and incorporating diversity in the classroom.