

MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LANGUAGES, BETWEEN CULTURES, BETWEEN TEXTS: USING HYBRID LITERACY PRACTICES IN BILINGUAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASS

Diana Schwinge¹
Adelphi University

1. Introduction

While children's picture books used to be read primarily in their country of origin, in today's international economy picture books are often exported and sold around the world. Thus, picture books for young children are frequently translated and are then used transnationally in a variety of cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the variety of processes that are used by bilingual children and their teachers to understand these texts.

While it may be considered the norm in many classrooms to draw upon one linguistic code, semiotic modality or participative structure at a time, one adaptation that can be made in classroom instruction is to combine and mix way of making meaning in a single literacy event. This mixing can be referred to as "hybridization" or "hybrid literacy practices" and is a principled, purposeful, and organized sense-making process. This paper examines how a teacher and the students in her second grade English/Spanish bilingual classroom in a major city on the Northeast Coast of the United States draw on the various linguistic, cultural, and textual resources that are available in their bilingual, bicultural classroom environment to make intertextual connections during the discussions that occur as part of the classroom literacy event of story book read-alouds.

This paper analyzes examples of hybrid literacy practices from a six period (two hour) read-aloud and discussion of the picture book *El cartero simpático en Navidad* (*The Jolly Postman at Christmas*) (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1991). The unique format of this text, the density and complexity of its intertextual and intervisual connections, its

¹ Diana Schwinge, School of Education, Adelphi University; Garden City, NY 11530, USA; schwinge@adelphi.edu

genre, and its foreign authors and localized Spanish translation make the text a potentially challenging one for the Puerto Rican students. This analysis shows how the teacher deftly encouraged students to alternate between the written textual resources and the visual semiotic resources of the picture book in order to suggest additional intertextual connections, to use both Spanish and English to gain clues about the texts that are being referred to in the book, and to employ a variety of participation structures to identify and clarify linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. These examples demonstrate that students can make more intertextual connections when all of their semiotic, linguistic, cultural, and social resources are tapped to aid their listening comprehension.

2. Theoretical orientation

This theoretical orientation examines the concepts of intertextuality and hybridity as they will be discussed in this paper.

2.1. Intertextuality

Kristeva coined the word intertextuality in 1966, and it was initially defined as “the insertion of history into a text and of this text into history” (Kristeva, 1986: 39). Current ideas about the definition of intertextuality also draw heavily on the work of Bakhtin (1986) who saw each utterance as a link in the chain of communication. Since text is part of a chain, all utterances are shaped by the prior texts that have gone before them and shape those texts that will come after them. Thus, all text is both a response to former texts, and also written in anticipation of future texts. As Bakhtin noted, “Our speech... is filled with others’ words, varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’, varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and reaccentuate” (Bakhtin, 1986: 89).

However, rather than solely being a cognitive skill, the ability to make intertextual connections between particular texts, in a appropriate manner, for a particular purpose requires an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of a literacy event. Thus, the number and type of intertextual connections that are made by students during classroom literature discussions depends on the classroom context.

Research such as Sipe's 1996 study of conversations during elementary school read-alouds has shown that intertextual connections make up to ten percent of all the discourse turns of the monolingual students he observed learning in rich literacy environments. A different finding was reported in a recent study by Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson (1999/2000) that compared the different types of connections that first grade students made when discussing picture books in literature circles. The students in the study were divided into three groups. The two monolingual English-speaking groups of students were found to spend many discourse turns making intertextual connections with other storybooks, while the group of Spanish-dominant groups of learners made no intertextual connections even when prompted by the teacher to do so. Instead, the Spanish dominant students spent their discussion time storytelling. This did enable the students to make connections between the storybooks and their personal lives. While this is also a valuable way to approach texts, the authors note that more research needs to be done in order to learn how classroom environments can be adapted in order to give bilingual students access to explicit instruction and literacy experiences that will encourage and enable them to make intertextual connections when reading and discussing texts.

2.2. Hybrid literacy practices

One possible way in which to encourage the creation of intertextual connections during classroom read-alouds is to use "hybridization" or "hybrid literacy practices". It is important to note that this mixing is principled, purposeful, and organized. As Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Álvarez & Chiu (1999) state, "...hybrid literacy practices are not simply code-switching as the alternation between two language codes. They are more a systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process among those who share the code, as they strive to achieve mutual understanding" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Álvarez & Chiu, 1999: 88).

It is important to note that hybridization in literacy events is not just limited to the use of two different linguistic codes, but can also be applied to the mixing of other elements of a communicative interaction. In Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejeda (2000), a classroom instructional unit is analyzed in order to give examples of many types of hybridity. In the paper there are four examples, each of which shows hybridity operating in a different aspect of the interaction. One example shows how the teacher

uses an informal register to name a part of the body. This could be considered the use of a hybrid linguistic code. In another example, the analysis shows how the teacher responds to unauthorized side talk, which could be considered using hybrid conversational turns. The third example shows how movements as well as words are used to explain classroom lesson content. This could be considered the use of hybrid semiotic means of communication. Also, in one example the teacher allows spontaneous interactions rather than the initiation-response-evaluation (I-R-E) pattern that frequently characterizes classroom interactions. This could be considered an example of hybrid conversational floor. Thus, it is not only linguistic codes, but also other elements of communicative interaction that can be utilized in hybrid ways in the classroom.

3. Setting and methodology

The elementary school where this research was conducted is situated in the heart of the Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia. Located just a block away from a major Puerto Rican shopping area, a cultural activity center, and a local library with a section of Spanish language children's books, the school is able to draw upon a variety of cultural resources. The school educates approximately 770 students; 92 per cent of these students have a family income low enough to qualify for a free or reduced school lunch.

The data presented and analyzed in this paper were collected as part of a three-year ethnographic discourse analytic study of one second grade bilingual classroom. The teacher of the second grade class, Ms. Santiago, is of Puerto Rican ethnicity and grew up in New Jersey. All of students had at least one parent who was born outside the continental United States, and the classes had a right rate of mobility in part due to circular migration to Puerto Rico.

In the class I took the role of a participant observer. Field notes, audio and video tapes, documents, and interviews were used to attempt to gain an understanding of the way that literacy events in classroom were planned and conducted from the viewpoint of the participants. While the primary focus of the study was on the classroom read-alouds that were done as part of the reading program, additional classroom events were also observed.

4. The text: *El cartero simpático en Navidad*

One major influence on a read-aloud is the text that is used. Even though it is true that all texts are shaped by the utterances that came before them, intertextuality is especially important in texts that are reaccentuated version of other texts. For example, some books are purposefully written as variations of other stories or include well-known characters and plot elements in new settings or configurations. In order to fully understand this type of text, it is essential for readers to recognize the story characters or elements that are being borrowed and the way in which they are reaccentuated in an ironic or humorous tone in the new version. *El cartero simpático en Navidad* (*The Jolly Postman at Christmas*), contains letters that appear to be written by and sent to various characters from classic fairy tales, popular children's stories, and nursery rhymes. This book is an example of a type of text that some in the field of children's literature refer to as "postmodern picture books" and that some companies selling children's literature describe in their catalogs as "fractured fairy tales".

Postmodern picture books have become increasingly popular in recent years, and titles such as the ones that Ms. Santiago read to her class are often used in elementary school classrooms. A teacher in Britain, Bromley (1996), has written about her experiences with reading this genre of text with her own students. She suggests that since making intertextual connections are crucial to understanding books like the *Jolly Postman* series, teachers should instruct students that they should play a type of "I spy" game while reading; the students should identify references to characters or plot elements as they are mentioned in the story. In her paper, Bromley (1996) reports that when reading Ahlberg's books, British children in her primary school class immediately identified many references to characters and plot elements from other fairy tales, children's stories, and nursery rhymes. As she states about her experiences reading *The Jolly Postman* books with her British primary school students, "The discussion which followed clearly demonstrated that the children had no need for formal instruction. I started by asking them to identify the stories and nursery rhymes that they recognized in *The Jolly Postman*. Little hands shot up in the air like rockets on bonfire night. There wasn't anyone who didn't feel part of this discussion". Clearly, students in Bromley's class were easily able to identify many of the intertextual connections present in this book.

While Ms. Santiago was unfamiliar with Bromley's work, she used very similar methods to the ones mentioned in Bromley's book chapter to encourage her students to name as many of the borrowed characters and plot elements as possible. However, while the students in Ms. Santiago's class clearly showed that they understood the nature of this type of text, they had significant difficulties identifying the characters and plot elements.

This section examines four qualities that potentially make the picture book *El cartero simpático en Navidad* challenging for use during a read-aloud: the book's format, its density of references to other texts, the characteristics of "postmodern" picture books, and its translation. This analysis does not mean to suggest that these characteristics are bad or that books such as this one should not be read aloud to children. In fact, it is often interesting, entertaining, and informative to read books that are complex, full of references to other texts, and that provide exposure to diverse perspectives and language varieties. However, this analysis does suggest that it is possible to identify features of *El cartero simpático en Navidad* that make it a potentially challenging book for use in an elementary school read-aloud to bilingual Puerto Rican students in North Philadelphia.

4.1. A unique format

This book has a unique format. On first glance, the plot of the book seems rather simple. *El cartero simpático en Navidad* is a "home away home" story; a tale of a postman who delivers mail on his bicycle on Christmas Eve to a wide variety of story book characters and then during a snowstorm is returned to his house by hitching a ride on Santa's sleigh. However, enclosed between the pages of the story are actual envelopes containing mail addressed to storybook characters. When a reader reaches into the envelopes they find that this mail is in a variety of formats and genres including Christmas cards, puzzles, and a Christmas annual fun book for children. Since some of the inserts are as long as twelve pages, this book has more text than the average 32-page picture book. Reading a text of this length in a learning environment where read-alouds last an average of fifteen minutes could possibly be challenging. Also, it is not only the text contained in the mail inside the envelopes, but also the addresses, postmarks, and the stamps on the letters that contain intertextual connections. In addition, while the inserts are eye catching, the pictures on many of the inserts are filled with details and

quite small. Surprisingly, the physical text of *El cartero simpático en Navidad* is physically smaller than the English version. When the pictures in books are difficult to see from far away during a read-aloud, children need to rely more on their listening ability during the read-aloud. Thus, while the format of this book is novel, its uniqueness, length, and small pictures could potentially make it more difficult for students to recognize its intertextuality.

4.2. The density and complexity of intertextual and intervisual connections

While other children's books may include references to fairy tales and nursery rhymes, most of these texts refer to a limited number of intertexts. In comparison, the density and the complexity of the intertextual and intervisual connections in *El cartero simpático en Navidad* is very high. Over forty classic children's stories, nursery rhymes, and fairy tales are referred to in the text, and even more are suggested through the pictures. These references are often quite brief; as many as four texts are mentioned in a single sentence of text. In addition, many of the intertextual connections are not just simple co-thematic intertextual connections where stories are identified through a mention of a character, but rather are co-generic intertextual connections that require the comprehension of the organization or plot of the stories.

4.3. A postmodern picture book

An additional challenge posed by this book is that it is what is often characterized by researchers in the field of children's literature as a "postmodern picture book". In order to identify the intertextual connections in this book, it is helpful for readers to realize that the authors have created their text through three processes: combining different stories, changing characters, and reaccentuating texts. First, in order to identify the intertextual connections in this book, the readers must accept the premise that characters that are usually seen as inhabiting their own story worlds actually live in the same neighborhood. In addition, they share a mailman and are eagerly writing to one another. Second, readers must also accept the author's right to change characters from other stories. In this text, the characters from other stories have a life even after their traditional tales have ended. For example, in *El cartero simpático en Navidad* the three bears have now become the four little bears after the addition of another baby bear. In addition, Humpty Dumpty is recuperating in the hospital after his bad fall, and Bo Peep

has written a letter to Santa Claus asking for binoculars to help her in a continuing search for her lost sheep.

4.4. A transformed text: Written in Britain, translated in Spain

El cartero simpático en Navidad was originally written by authors in Great Britain incorporating cultural knowledge and intertextual references that they believed would be accessible to British children, and then was translated in Spain for Spanish children. Thus, when read to Puerto Rican children in Philadelphia it is possible that the foreign origins of the text could create two problems. First, students could be lacking knowledge of certain cultural referents or intertexts that are usually known by children their age in another country, but to which these children would be unfamiliar. For example, students in Ms. Santiago's class could not figure out the game that Old King Coles' fiddlers were playing in one of the book's illustrations. Later, Ms. Santiago and I closely examined the picture and realized that they were playing the game of cricket. This game is popular in Great Britain, but is not frequently shown on television in the United States. Thus, it is not surprising that the students in this class were unable to identify cultural references like this one.

In addition, the translation of a text can be a key factor. Texts are generally not only translated, but also localized. Localization is a process of translation that adapts a text rather than solely translating the text word for word to increase the chances of a specific group of people understanding them. Localization in translation is an especially important factor when dealing with texts translated into Spanish since it is a language that is used in many nations and thus has a large number of varieties. While there are some translations that attempt to use a "common Spanish" that can be understood without ambiguities throughout the Hispanic world, the development of "common Spanish" has been difficult even for those translating utilitarian texts such as computer help manuals. There is evidence in a recent article by Desmet (2001) on the translation of the Jolly Postman books into Danish that these texts were not literally translated word by word, but instead used intertextual substitution and addition to localize the intertextual references and the language used in the text. It appears that a similar process of localization was used when the Jolly Postman books were translated for a continental Spanish audience. For example, the Jolly Postman books are written in rhyme, and the Spanish translation takes great care to create a rhyme in Spanish even when the text has

to be changed substantially in order to do so. Also, while some varieties of Spanish such as Spanish as spoken by Puerto Ricans does not frequently make use of certain linguistic forms, this translation frequently uses linguistic forms such as the *vosotros* forms that are used primarily in Spain. None of these comments are meant to suggest that the translation of *El cartero simpático en Navidad* is a poor translation; in fact the way that the Spanish translation maintains the rhyme and the overall effect of the English version is evidence of a skilled translation. However, since this translation was not localized for the group of students who were read this book, it is possible that the translation itself could have an effect on the students' ability to make intertextual connections and their overall ability to understand the text.

5. The interaction: Using hybrid literacy practices

While the structure and organization of this text had characteristics that made it difficult for the students to make the intertextual connections, it is possible to analyze in the following two discourse excerpts how Ms. Santiago and the students in her class used a variety of hybrid semiotic, linguistic, and participative literacy practices in order to successfully make intertextual connections.

5.1. Jack and the Beanstalk

While the students in the class were familiar from the previous class read-alouds with many of the nursery rhyme and fairy tale characters that populated the pages of *El cartero simpático en Navidad*, this still did not mean that they could easily identify them from the text. For example, in the following discourse excerpt taken from the second day of the read-aloud, Ms. Santiago read through a one sentence double page spread from the book that contained intertextual references to four texts. Ms. Santiago then showed the students the picture on the page, paused, and waited for them to identify the intertextual references that they noticed. However, the students were unable to identify the references that appeared to be suggested by the text. This discourse excerpt shows how Ms. Santiago utilized hybrid semiotic literacy practices to aid students in identifying an intertextual connection between a mention of a beanstalk and two versions of a fairy tale that they had read in class: *Jack and the Beanstalk* and a

version of this story that was included in their basal reading book entitled *Freddy and the Magic Beans*.

Discourse excerpt A

Jack and the Beanstalk (Original version)

- 1 Señorita Santiago: si Ud. ve una de esas cosas puede alzar la mano y yo llamo para
- 2 que pasar acá y nos enseñarle esas cosas
- 3 Señorita Santiago: otra vez *una habichuela que casi toca el cielo*, y no es una
- 4 habichuela chiquita sino la mata de la habichuela la ves Manuel
- 5 enséñales
- 6 Luis: como la mata de frijoles
- 7 Señorita Santiago: sí como la mata de frijoles de quién
- 8 Estudiantes: Freddi
- 9 Señorita Santiago: Freddi en el cuento que leímos en lectura o
- 10 Teresa: Jack and the Beanstalk
- 11 Señorita Santiago: Jack and the Beanstalk muy bien

Jack and the Beanstalk (English translation)

- 1 Ms. Santiago: if you see one of these things you can raise you hand and I will
- 2 call
- 3 Ms. Santiago: on you to come here and show us these things
- 4 another time *A bean that almost touches the sky*, and it is not a
- 5 little bean but it is a beanstalk do you see it Manuel
- 6 Luis: show us
- 7 Ms. Santiago: it is like a beanstalk
- 8 Students: yes like the beanstalk of whom
- 9 Ms. Santiago: Freddi
- 10 Teresa: Freddi in the story that we read in reading or
- 11 Ms. Santiago: Jack and the Beanstalk
- 12 Ms. Santiago: Jack and the Beanstalk very good

Clearly, one of the challenges in making connections using the Spanish language translation of this book is that some of the ways that objects and characters are described are not as explicit as the English version, probably because the translation has changed the references to maintain the rhyme pattern of the text. For example, the English language version of the book refers to a “swaying beanstalk towering to the sky”. However, the Spanish version says “una habichuela que casi toca el cielo”. It is posible that identifying the object as a bean instead of a beanstalk could make it more difficult for students to realize that the story being referred to was *Jack and the Beanstalk*. However, one feature of many of the intertextual references that are suggested by *El cartero simpático en Navidad* is that these references are made both in

the text and in an accompanying picture. Thus, Ms. Santiago uses a semiotic literacy practice and encourages the students to listen to the items mentioned in the text one by one, and then she has one student to come to the front of the room to point to each of the characters or elements mentioned in the text. With this practice, Ms. Santiago is simultaneously using the written text and the visual illustrations of the book to help the students make intertextual connections.

In this case, when Ms. Santiago finished reading the line of text, she could see that none of the students had their hands raised to volunteer to point out “a bean that almost touches the sky”. Thus, she further scaffolded the activity by giving the students an extra hint; what they were looking for was not a bean, but really a beanstalk. She emphasizes her point by using her hands to show something little and then expanding the distance between them when mentioning the beanstalk. While Ms. Santiago was not familiar with the English language version of the book, her comment reconstructed for the students the information that was present in the original English version, but was missing from the Spanish translation of the text. At this point, several students raised their hands to come and point out the beanstalk. The process of rereading the text, giving a hint, and waiting for a student to point out the beanstalk also gave more time for the students to think about the intertextual reference.

After this use of simultaneous visual and oral cues, a hint, and extra time, students were able to identify the intertextual connection between the beanstalk and a version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* that they had read in their class basal reader. However, Ms. Santiago’s scaffolding in this conversation continued as she inquired about another text that also had a beanstalk. At that point, a student was finally able to give the name of the text that was probably the one the author intended to refer to in this text, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. In this case, the strategy of returning to read the text a second time and matching the description from the text with the accompanying picture, along with the teachers’ additional hints that scaffolded the conversation, did help students to make an additional intertextual connection.

5.2. There was an old woman

While the content of many fairy tales and children’s stories can be easily translated, nursery rhymes are more often specific to a single language. Thus, making intertextual connections between the book *The Jolly Postman* and the nursery rhymes

suggested by the text often required students to draw on their knowledge of English language nursery rhymes. While code switching during read-alouds in this class is rather unusual, the following excerpt illustrates the use of code switching as a hybrid literacy practice in a way that was frequently employed in this class.

Discourse excerpt B

There was an old woman (Original version)

- 1 Señorita Santiago: *Había una vieja que se tragó una mosca.*
- 2 Estudiantes: Ewwe
- 3 Señorita Santiago: *Había una vieja que vivía en un zapato.*
- 4 Estudiantes: Ewwe
- 5 Señorita Santiago: *Había una vieja que vivía en un cesto.*
- 6 Estudiantes: Ewwe
- 7 Señorita Santiago: *y lo más raro del caso: las tres era la misma vieja.*
- 8 Estudiantes: Uh (laughs)
- 9 Señorita Santiago: (laughs)
- 10 Marcos: yo sé tú lo oí tú lo oí esto de una muchacha que vivía en un zapato
- 11 que tenía muchos hijos y no tenía nada que comer
- 12 Señorita Santiago: Old Mother no that is Old Mother Hubbard There was a woman
- 13 who lived There once was an old woman who lived in a shoe she
- 14 had so many children she didn't know what to do I don't
- remember
- 15 what happened after that

There was an old woman (English translation)

- 1 Ms. Santiago: *There was an old woman who swallowed a fly.*
- 2 Students: Ewwe
- 3 Ms. Santiago: *There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.*
- 4 Students: Ewwe
- 5 Ms. Santiago: *There was an old woman who lived in a basket.*
- 6 Students: Ewwe
- 7 Ms. Santiago: *And this is the strange part: It was the same woman.*
- 8 Students: Uh (laughs)
- 9 Ms. Santiago: (laughs)
- 10 Marcos: I know you heard you heard this of a woman that lived in a shoe
- 11 that had many children and had nothing to eat.
- 12 Ms. Santiago: Old Mother no that is Old Mother Hubbard There was a woman
- 13 who lived There once was an old woman who lived in a shoe she
- 14 had so many children she didn't know what to do I don't
- remember
- 15 what happened after that

One feature of a bilingual classroom is that the participants in the discussion can potentially use both codes that they share in order to create meaning. Frequently, it

seems that the young second grade learners in this classroom can remember and paraphrase the content of what they have read and describe this content in Spanish even when they cannot remember the exact words that were used in the text that they have read or heard in English. Thus, students can potentially make more intertextual connections if they know that they can suggest their connections in their first language and rely on more knowledgeable peers or the teacher to provide the wording of the text in the second language. We have seen an example of this strategy for creating meaning in two languages cooperatively here in this excerpt when Marcos paraphrases a nursery rhyme in Spanish and expresses the belief that he knows that the teacher has heard this rhyme. This prompts Ms. Santiago to say the first part of the nursery rhyme in English, thus making the intertextual connection explicit.

This example exemplifies not only the use of hybrid linguistic literacy practices, but also hybrid participative literacy practices. Most of the time in this class, it is Ms. Santiago who asks questions or solicits the students' responses, often through an IRE sequence. However, in this case it is Marcos who solicits Ms. Santiago's participation in the conversation by telling her that "yo sé tú lo oí tú lo oí esto" ("I know you heard you heard this"). Thus, it is not only the teacher who can solicit information from the students in the read-aloud discussions, but also the students who can solicit information from Ms. Santiago. Thus, this excerpt exemplifies the use of both linguistic and participative hybrid literacy practices.

6. Conclusion

This chapter first analyzed the qualities of the text *El cartero simpático en Navidad* to suggest four possible reasons for the difficulties that the students in Ms. Santiago's class had in making intertextual connections: the unique format of the text, the density and complexity of its intertextual and intervisual connections, the postmodern stance of the text, and its translation. Then, this chapter analyzed three interactions from the six-day, two hour reading and discussion of this book in Ms. Santiago's class. This analysis showed how Ms. Santiago used hybrid semiotic, linguistic, and participative literacy practices in moment-to-moment interactions in order to assist the children in making intertextual connections. The examples

demonstrate that semiotic, linguistic, and social resources can be tapped to assist students in making more intertextual connections.

Appendix: Transcription notes

All names have been changed.

Words in italics Text read directly from the picture book. The original versions of the text were used; thus, these are not direct translations.

(XXX) Laughter or noises.

_____ Portion of discourse has been skipped.

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