

# ADULT BILITERACY

Sociocultural and Programmatic Responses

Edited by

Klaudia M. Rivera • Ana Huerta-Macías

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# ADULT BILITERACY

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*To our parents*

# Preface

This volume brings to the forefront linguistic, demographic, sociocultural, workforce, familial, academic, and other issues surrounding the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in the educational spaces occupied by adults in the United States. As such, it helps to fill a gap in the research literature on language development among adults, which has traditionally placed more emphasis on the development of English as a second or other language. Most importantly, it brings to light issues that are integral to the success of immigrant populations in the United States—issues that politicians, policy makers, educators, and employers must place at the top of their agendas as immigration reform is formulated and implemented. To not do so is to ensure failure not only for those adults who come to the United States seeking a better life and who make the success of our own day-to-day lives possible through their labor, but also for the future of this country.

## Background

The most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) has brought increased attention and urgency to the issue of adult literacy. The survey indicated that the number of adults who have those basic skills necessary to perform simple, everyday quantitative tasks rose from 75 to 79% since the last National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), in 1992. Prose literacy scores increased among African Americans by 6 points and among Asian/Pacific Islanders by 16 points. Document literacy scores also increased for African Americans by 8 points—as did overall quantitative literacy skills from the 1992 survey. What is troubling is that the average prose scores for Hispanic<sup>1</sup> Americans fell by 18 points, and the document literacy scores for this same group fell by 14 points, since the last NALS (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

This is of great concern, as Latinos form the largest so-called “minority” ethnic group in the United States, and yet they are the ones who seem to perform at the lowest levels, not only in terms of adult literacy but also in terms of educational achievement overall. Furthermore, the grim statistics do not end with the national assessments. Hispanics have the highest high school dropout rates. National dropout rates in 2001 were 65.7% for Hispanics compared to 7.3% for Whites. Statistics further indicate that in this same year, 68.7% of high school completers were White, 13.7% were Black, and 11.9% were Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Not surprisingly, Latinos also fall behind on a number of issues, including income, employment, and college degrees. In

2001, for instance, 24.9% of Hispanics lived in poverty, compared to 23.1% of Blacks and 7.9% of Whites (Poverty Gap, 2004).

Literacy is at the core of educational and economic advancement as well as health and general well-being. Clearly, we must do a better job of providing access to literacy development for all groups, but particularly for Latinos—including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorians, and all Spanish-speaking populations—being that the gaps are greatest in this group, which is, at the same time, as noted above, the largest ethnic group in the United States. Thus, the emphasis in this volume is on Latinos, while recognizing that the issues discussed apply to other ethnic, linguistic minority and immigrant groups as well.

The notion of *immigrant* also merits some discussion, for one cannot generically classify all Latinos or other groups who speak little or no English as simply immigrants. Demographers distinguish between individuals who are foreign born versus those who were born inside the United States, or are native born. For example, in many families the parents are foreign-born immigrants while the children are native born. This distinction is made, where appropriate, in the research literature and is also reported in this volume wherever relevant to the discussion.

Regardless of the immigrant classification, our Latino adult population must have increased access to education that assists them not only through adult basic education, but also through transition to college and an associate's or bachelor's degree, and ultimately to sustainable employment. This is not only an issue of basic human rights that provide access to literacy and education, but also an economic issue. Consider that in 2005, the Department of Labor reported 150 million people in our workforce. In 2005, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 3 million students graduated from high school. Thus, at best, only 2% of our workforce comes from public schools each year. Therefore, the source of workers must be the adult population today (Adult Competitiveness Challenge, 2006). Consider also reports indicating that within the next decade the United States will be 12 million short of the types of workers that will be needed—those with a GED or a high school diploma plus some college (Carnegie, 2002, cited in Adult Competitiveness Challenge, 2006). Couple this with the current demographics showing that Hispanics comprise 12.5% of the population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), and it becomes crystal clear that we must focus more attention on this group in order to maintain a successful economy in this country. It is imperative that we research and implement the most effective ways to help this population raise its educational, literacy, and biliteracy levels, and thus its economic status through increased education and attainment of jobs that pay sustainable wages.

Immigrants have always recognized that English language development is key to advancement in this country, and the long waiting lists for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes that are typical in our large urban areas are a testimony to their hunger for English. Trejos (2006) reports, for instance, that in

Maryland the waiting list for adult education services includes over 5,000 people, with most of them seeking ESL classes. It is incumbent upon us, as educators, policy makers, and administrators, to provide them with English while also validating and building on the Spanish language abilities that they bring with them. Additionally, we must advocate for a stronger and better funded adult education and literacy system in the United States that will better support our efforts toward literacy and biliteracy development. Sticht (2004) reports that

There is a grossly underfunded and underdeveloped adult education and literacy system in the United States with over 3,000 programs and close to 3 million enrollees per year. But the federal level of funding is less than US\$225 per enrollee. Even with state contributions added in, the average funding per enrollee across the United States is only about US\$650. (p. 1)

The lack of resources and educational attainment for Latino adults points to the need to use nontraditional methods of instruction that will accelerate their learning—methods that build on those strengths that our learners bring with them in the area of language development or learning of new knowledge. This includes linguistic, factual, and experiential knowledge. In the linguistic realm, learners bring with them knowledge of Spanish that can be utilized as a springboard for both literacy/biliteracy development and new knowledge. Even though the exact nature and role of transfer are not yet known (Cook, 1996), linguistic and educational research has indicated that literacy and learning in a second language are facilitated when there is a source of transferable skills from the native language (Cummins, 1980; Lanauze & Snow, 1989, cited in Baker, 2001). We also know that cognitive development takes place when we learn in a language that we understand. Additionally, the activation of schema and background knowledge as critical to new learning—whether a language or other new knowledge—has been highlighted by the National Research Council (2000). Therefore, the implication is that the use of two languages in the adult education and literacy classroom is sound pedagogy, and thus the need to look at not only literacy but also biliteracy in the education of adults—for one cannot ignore the linguistic and other knowledge of our learners as they engage in new learning. Previous knowledge must be accessed and developed if our students are going to acquire new knowledge in a sound and efficient manner. Use of the native language of the student then becomes a key piece in the process of literacy/biliteracy development and the acquisition of new knowledge.

We must additionally explore diverse learning environments and program designs when providing access to education by Latinos and all language minority groups. Community-based organizations, family literacy, and workforce education programs, for example, provide additional opportunities for matching student needs and interests with an educational program. Eisner (1994) in his discussion of concept formation and an expanded view of knowledge indicates



that “a broad array of opportunities represented by a wide array of forms of representation and modes of treatment ... increases educational equity for students by increasing the probability that they will be able to play to their strengths” (p. 89). The implication for adult education and literacy is thus the need to expand and contextualize learning for our adults, so that they may find different entry points to education and economic advancement.

## Overview of the Volume

This volume is founded on the notions discussed above: our basic human right to access to education and literacy, the significance of previous knowledge, and the need for diverse learning environments in adult literacy, including ESL. Thus, by virtue of these ideas, we expand the discussions in this volume to biliteracy and not solely literacy. Biliteracy is the ability to read and write and otherwise use two languages in socioculturally appropriate ways. Foundational information that enhances the understanding of these ideas, such as a discussion of theoretical notions on literacy and biliteracy development and a critical analysis of today’s demographics, is also provided herein. The book is structured in four sections.

Part I, “Adult Biliteracy: Perspectives and Policies,” includes two chapters and a photo essay. In Chapter 1, “Adult Bilingualism and Biliteracy in the United States: Theoretical Perspectives,” Klaudia M. Rivera and Ana Huerta-Macías discuss those linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural theoretical notions surrounding literacy and biliteracy development that are so significant in our work with adults who are acquiring a second language. Literacy and biliteracy development as a transactional process is a basic point in this chapter.

Chapter 2, “Adult Biliteracy and Language Diversity: How Well Do National Data Inform Policy?” by Mario Castro and Terrence G. Wiley, guides readers through an examination of the demographics in the United States. Their discussion helps us to uncover trends that in turn can help us develop sound policy for the education of adults. The authors highlight the significance of Spanish in the United States, being that it is second only to English in terms of the number of speakers in the language. They further indicate that more attention needs to be paid to literacy and job skills development that can be mediated in another language; traditionally, the emphasis has been on oral English language skills.

The photo essay, “Literacy and Biliteracy: Expressions in Environmental Print,” by Klaudia M. Rivera and Ana Huerta-Macías, depicts a series of images illustrating the use of literacy and biliteracy in environmental print, including, for instance, advertising, public announcements, and billboards. The images highlight the use of languages for sociocultural, economic, and political purposes. They also provide a sampling of the many types of linguistic variations that are created in writing with the integration of two languages, variations that are now commonplace in our culturally and linguistically diverse society.

Part II, "Adult Biliteracy in Diverse Contexts," comprises five chapters. Chapter 3, "Adult Biliteracy in Community-Based Organizations: Venues of Participation, Agents of Transformation," by Klaudia M. Rivera, highlights the roles that community organizations play as partners in the educational services provided to adults. Community-based organizations are central to our work in adult literacy and biliteracy. Rivera offers a rich discussion of how community-based programs, among other things, provide leadership and economic development as well as multiple avenues for the use and development of the native language and English through literacy-building activities ranging from popular theater to leadership development and the establishment of cooperatives.

In Chapter 4, "Workforce Education for Latinos: A Bilingual Approach," Ana Huerta-Macias provides a discussion of how the native language skills can be tapped to accelerate learning in workforce education. She describes a dual-language approach to learning that builds on the cognitive and linguistic skills that students bring to the classroom. An important element of this approach is that students are provided with opportunities to apply what they have learned through partnerships with business, industry, or other entities, such that the learning is contextualized through real-life experiences.

Elizabeth Quintero provides snapshots of two family literacy programs in Chapter 5, "A Crossroads: Family Education Programs." She describes critical literacy activities in which culture, language, prior knowledge, and current dilemmas are addressed, and emphasizes the need for such programs to provide opportunities for personal and social transformation.

Issues of adult literacy and biliteracy have traditionally been discussed in circles outside of academics, where the native language has most often been viewed as problematic to student success. In Chapter 6, "Academic Biliteracies for Adults in the United States," Ellen Skilton-Sylvester highlights two examples of university programs that move beyond this view and discusses how U.S. educational institutions seeking to develop academic literacy can create a space for the native language. Within this context, the native language is seen as a resource and not a problem.

Civics education brings yet another opportunity for the development of adult literacy and biliteracy. In Chapter 7, "Civics Education and Adult Biliteracy," James S. Powrie problematizes citizenship education and describes how civics programs can address the dual-language needs of learners in a way that is systematic, coherent, and educationally sound. By examining two EL/Civics programs, the chapter presents a framework for categorizing various types of services and strategies that build on and help develop bilingualism and biliteracy.

Part III, "Themes, Issues, Challenges," concludes the volume. A discussion of adult literacy and biliteracy would be incomplete without some perspectives on the role that assessment plays in adult learning. In Chapter 8, "Capturing What Counts: Language and Literacy Assessments for Bilingual Adults," Heide Spruck Wrigley emphasizes that no single measure should serve as the basis for

assessing and evaluating student abilities and growth. She highlights the complexities embedded in assessing what students are able to do in two languages. Wrigley also provides examples of how alternative assessments can fill gaps left by large-scale standardized tests.

Chapter 9, “Issues and Future Directions,” by Ana Huerta-Macías and Klaudia M. Rivera, threads together the different themes presented in the previous chapters and recommends additional avenues for research in adult literacy and biliteracy education.

## Endnote

1. The authors use the term *Latino* throughout this volume when referring inclusively to all Spanish-speaking ethnic groups in the United States. However, the term *Hispanic* is sometimes used when referring to the research literature that uses Hispanic rather than Latino.

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We are grateful to those who came before for what they taught us and to the many who teach us today.

## About the Editors

**Klaudia M. Rivera** has more than twenty years of experience creating and implementing adult native language literacy and ESL programs that foster bilingualism and biliteracy for Latinos and other language minorities. These programs apply critical pedagogy, participatory and popular education in community-based contexts. Her research and publications are in the areas of native language literacy, ESL, critical literacy and biliteracy, and popular education. Her most recent research is about the role of worker centers in providing education to day laborers. Dr. Rivera is a professor of language and literacy at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York.

**Ana Huerta-Macías** is a professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her research interests are in the areas of bilingualism, literacy and biliteracy, and workforce education—particularly with English language learners who are native speakers of Spanish. Dr. Macías has numerous publications in the areas of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages), bilingual family literacy, and workforce education. Her most recent book is *Working with English Language Learners: Perspectives and Practice*.

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# **PART I**

## **Adult Biliteracy**

### *Perspectives and Policies*