

# One World, Many Languages: Using Dual-Language Books

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**As teachers of elementary school students,** we value helping children make global connections, develop geographic literacy, and increase cultural awareness for global citizenship. The increasing language diversity in our classrooms presents an opportunity to enhance student awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity in our country and in the world. Consider these statistics:

- Nearly one-in-five U.S. residents age five or older (47 million people) spoke a language other than English at home in 2000. That was an increase of 15 million people since 1990.
- After English (215.4 million) and Spanish (28.1 million), the language most commonly spoken at home was Chinese (2 million), eclipsing French, German, and Italian over the decade of the 90s. And the largest proportional increase in the 1990s was Russian.<sup>1</sup>

How can teachers simultaneously address the needs of English speakers and English language learners in the classroom? How can teachers investigate language diversity as an aspect of culture?

## Dual-Language Resources

During my early career as a sixth grade social studies teacher, I had little success finding resources to support some of my linguistically diverse students as they learned to speak English. Children's books in Spanish, German, and French were easy to find at the public library or in book stores; however, I was unable to obtain books for my students who spoke Hmong, Russian, or Gujarati, for example. Fortunately, publishers have responded to America's changing demographics with books, as well as audio materials, in multiple languages, often in dual-language formats. A growing number of U.S. public and school libraries shelve children's books in multiple languages. The Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, has evaluated dual-language books representing more than thirteen languages.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers can find multilingual resources representing seventy languages in the catalogs of several American and European companies.<sup>3</sup> For example,

- Culture For Kids markets a wide variety of social studies materials that includes multilingual resources.
- Language Lizard markets dual-language children's products in more than forty languages. Their website offers a monthly newsletter to families and teachers, and they post lesson plans to encourage language use and awareness.
- Books Without Borders offers books, videos, and audio recordings in Spanish, Chinese, and other languages.
- Milet presents unique children's books in twenty-five dual-language combinations.
- You are Special offers dual-language books in fifty languages and social studies resources to teach about world culture.
- World Language Resources offers children's books in more than seventy languages, as well as software and audio resources.
- Mantra Lingua publishes numerous multilingual resources, including talking books that read the text via an audio file in the language selected.

Many of the company websites list book reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist* (of the American Library Association), or other reviewers of children's literature. From such sources, teachers can select books that mirror the language diversity in their classroom and community. Teachers can also use such books as part of a lesson about a country or content being studied.

## Teaching with Dual-Language Resources

Children's books can be used to prompt powerful social studies learning experiences such as inquiry into world cultures.

English speaking teachers can read the English text of a dual-language book to their students; they can invite a native speaker to be a guest reader of the dual-language book, show students the different appearance of the text in two languages, or play the audio version of certain stories spoken in different languages. Reading a trade book printed in English and Urdu, for example, can inspire learning about India and Pakistan and engage students in learning about world cultures. This simple extension can allow students to:

- Gain exposure to languages other than English;
- Develop awareness of language diversity;
- Increase their understanding of world geography;
- Become intrigued about experiences different than their own;
- Honor the families, culture, and languages of multilingual students; and
- Clarify misconceptions they may have developed about various cultures.

When students become used to seeing how other languages look on the page—a poem in Chinese, a story in Russian, a photo caption in Arabic—they are more likely to express open-mindedness and interest in other cultures. Students can grow up familiar with the fact that people in Japan, India (Hindi), Mexico, and Israel all write using different alphabet systems.

### Examples of Dual-Language Books

During the past year, I have been working with new teachers as they design social studies lessons using multilingual resources. Pre-service teachers—who are often monolingual—develop awareness of language diversity and world cultures, and tackle their fears about working with children who speak languages different from their own. Participants in this curriculum writing and teaching project design lessons that incorporate state standards, NCSS themes such as I. Culture; III. People, Places and Environment; IV. Individual Development and Identity; and IX. Global Connections.<sup>4</sup> Many state standards include learning outcomes that can be addressed by studying countries of the world. For example, Pennsylvania’s standards for civics, economics, history and geography can be integrated into teaching about various countries, and their people.<sup>5</sup>

*The Giant Turnip*, *The Dragon’s Tears*, and *Buri and the Marrow* are folktales from Russian, Chinese, and Bengali cultures, respectively, that can be used to examine values and traditions of their nations of origin.

Stories such as *Samira’s Eid* and *All Kinds of Beliefs* can be used to help children learn about religions and people’s differing beliefs.

*That’s My Mum* and *Floppy’s Friends*, while not representative of a particular region or culture, can involve students in learning about civic responsibility, accepting others, and appreciating individual similarities and differences. The following examples illustrate social studies learning activities that

can be used in conjunction with these dual-language books.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Giant Turnip**

This is a Russian story about students who work together to build a community garden. They cooperate to solve a problem. In doing so, students realize they must work together to achieve their common goal. Through this Russian tale, students can learn about cooperation, gender equity, differently-abled people, care for the environment and cultural celebrations. The children depicted in this book represent varying ethnicities and physical ability. Teachers use this book in conjunction with other world tales to examine similarities bridging cultures and nations. The Giant Turnip is available in more than twenty languages. Teachers in my curriculum writing project used the English/Somali version to introduce concepts in geography, civics, history and economics by having students:

1. Locate Russia (where the tale originated) and Somalia (where Somali is the official language);
2. Study each country’s natural resources;
3. Learn how people from these geographically different lands interact with their environment;
4. Compare how people in each country attempt to meet their daily needs;
5. Examine global trade, international relationships and current events affecting Russia and Somalia;
6. Discuss the responsibilities of the characters as members of their community;
7. Reconstruct the Russian tale to portray geographically accurate information and illustrations to depict the selected countries; and
8. Examine similarities and differences between Somali and English alphabets.

Of course, teachers can adapt these activities based on the second language selected. A teacher’s selection may be influenced by the school curriculum, student interest, or the heritage of the students or local community.

### **The Dragon’s Tears**

This book retells a Chinese folktale describing how the lakes of the Min River were formed. The story depicts physical geography, natural resources, and families’ needs. Teachers may use this book to engage children as they:

1. Learn about interaction between humans and their environment;
2. Explore the physical features of China, including the Min River;
3. Research resources and crops grown in China, and compare them to those found in the book or to those grown in the students’ community;

4. Learn about Chinese history, art, and architecture;
5. Compare the portrayal of Chinese culture found in the book to contemporary life in China;
6. Listen to the audio version of the story in Chinese; and
7. Construct tales that depict each student's culture.

China's growing influence in the world economically and politically provides opportunities for social studies learning.

### ***Buri and the Marrow***

This book retells a Bengali folktale about an old woman who faces wild animals on her journey to her daughter's home. On the return trip, Buri (the Bengali word for "old woman") hides in a marrow (squash) to avoid the animals. The illustrations depict clothing, homes, wildlife and landscapes of South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh. This book is offered in sixteen dual-language arrangements, including the South Asian languages of Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, and Gujarati. Teachers in my curriculum-writing project used the Bengali version, which reflected the Bengali origin of the tale. Teachers may use this story to:

1. Reinforce geography skills such as using maps to locate place, describe relative location, and calculate distance;
2. Examine cultural values or compare folktales across different world regions;
3. Learn about places where Bengali is spoken currently and graph the number of Bengali speakers globally;
4. Investigate Bengali culture and compare it to the students' cultures;
5. Help students understand how societies transmit culture and how culture is similar and different across groups; and
6. Discuss with students ways in which various cultures affect individual development and influence people across cultures.

Ethnologue.com and the CIA World Factbook.com provide basic information about world languages and the countries where they are spoken.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Samira's Eid***

This is a story about a family's observance of Eid-ul-Fitr, the Muslim celebration ending Ramadan's month of fasting. The author depicts Muslim culture through the experiences of the main character, Samira. Through this book, students can learn about Islam, Ramadan, and the celebration of Eid. Religious and cultural aspects of Eid are illustrated through the story. Teachers can use this book to help students:

1. Draw connections between this Muslim celebration and other holidays;
2. Analyze national and cultural holidays;
3. Build awareness and appreciation of religious and cultural diversity;
4. Help children see similarities and differences among people's beliefs, religious or secular;
5. Acknowledge and challenge misconceptions about Islam;
6. Use maps to identify countries where Islam is currently practiced (be sure to include the United States); and
7. Initiate a study of religious, cultural, and national holidays celebrated in America.

As described earlier, depending upon the languages selected, learners may investigate the countries where particular languages are spoken. *Samira's Eid* is published in English with parallel text in Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, French, or Turkish as well as other languages, most of which are associated with countries that have large Muslim communities.

### ***All Kinds of Beliefs***

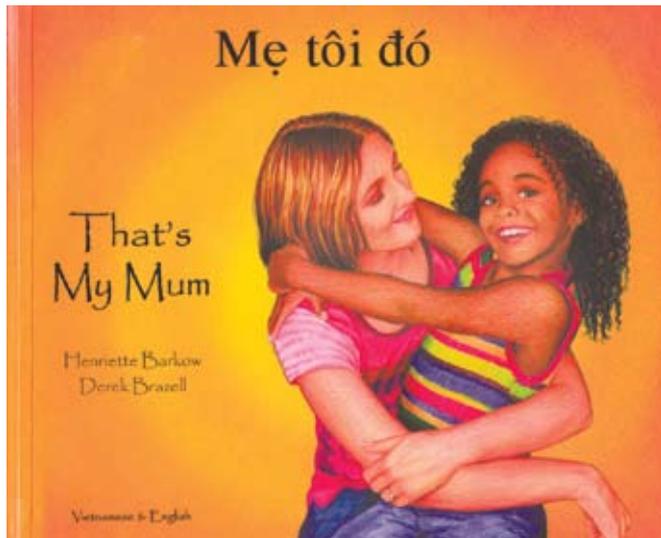
This book celebrates children's religious and cultural differences by providing basic information about six religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism. It describes places of worship, religious practices and garments associated with each religion. This book can be used to:

1. Explore major religions of the world and to discuss belief systems;
2. Study cultures and customs within the United States and world wide;
3. Investigate countries where particular religions developed and examine the historical and cultural impact;
4. Discuss religion as a source of conflict in history; and
5. Consider historical documents with attention to the rights and responsibilities of citizens and government regarding religious freedom in the United States.

Depending upon a school's curriculum, teachers may include books like *All Kinds of Beliefs* in lessons about holidays, religion, culture, or geography.

### **That's My Mum**

This book is a story about children from ethnically mixed families. Mia's complexion is closer to her father's than to her mother's. Strangers often assume that her mother is a babysitter. Mia's friend Kai gets a similar reaction from adults who do not know his family. The children are upset, but they devise a plan to prevent others from making assumptions based on their physical appearances. This story can be used to:



1. Teach students about assumptions, misconceptions, and prejudice in a manner appropriate for early elementary learners;
2. Introduce the idea of family diversity and stereotypes;
3. Discuss culture, individual similarities and differences;
4. Encourage conversations about diversity, both in the United States and worldwide; and
5. Examine historical events in the United States and in the world that relate to issues of prejudice, discrimination, or racism.

Furthermore, this book makes an excellent addition to a classroom library as it honors diverse families, including adoptive families who may have experiences similar to those portrayed in the story.

### **Floppy's Friends**

This book is a story about a rabbit that has one floppy ear. Floppy realizes that while all of his friends come in different shapes and colors, they stay in segregated groups on the playground. He decides to play with each group of rabbits regardless of the color of their fur. When a spotted rabbit moves to the school and is teased by the other rabbits, Floppy intervenes for his new friend. Finally, Floppy brings together all of the rabbits. Teachers can use this story to teach engage students in discussion about:

1. Individual rights and responsibilities of good citizens;
2. Laws and rules in American and global culture that prevent segregation and discrimination;
3. Civic action, historically and in students' lives;
4. Conflict resolution and problem solving;
5. Civic discussion in democracy;
6. Civil Rights in our country's history and abroad;
7. Playground, school, and community rules; and
8. Human rights and conflicts between groups.

Elementary school teachers can be creative in their use of children's literature to initiate meaningful discussions that are relevant to students' lives and can engage students in practicing early skills of democratic citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

Our students live in an increasingly global community. It is essential for us to help them develop greater understanding of the world around them and their place within it. Teaching social studies concepts and skills through an introduction to world languages is a powerful vehicle for student learning. Simultaneously, teachers can increase student awareness of language diversity by teaching students about the world and its many countries and supporting English language learners. Fortunately, for linguistically diverse students and classroom teachers, there are more linguistically diverse resources available. As members of a global community, we can use meaningful and authentic social studies experiences to teach students about our one world and its many languages.

### **Notes**

1. Mike Bergman, "Nearly 1-in-5 Speak a Foreign Language at Home," Census Bureau Reports, [www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/census\\_000/001406.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/census_000/001406.html).
2. American Library Association's (ALA) Division, "Association for Library Service to Children's (ALSC's) Bilingual Books for Children," [www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/booklists/bilingualbooks.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/booklists/bilingualbooks.htm).
3. Culture for Kids, [www.cultureforkids.com](http://www.cultureforkids.com); Language Lizard, [www.language lizard.com](http://www.language lizard.com); Books without Borders, [www.bookswithoutborders.com](http://www.bookswithoutborders.com); Milet, [www.milet.com](http://www.milet.com); You Are Special, [www.youarespecial.com](http://www.youarespecial.com); World Language Resources, [www.worldlanguage.com](http://www.worldlanguage.com); Mantra Lingua, [www.mantralingua.com](http://www.mantralingua.com).
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1997), [www.socialstudies.org](http://www.socialstudies.org).
5. Pennsylvania Department of Education's Content Standards are at [www.pde.state.pa.us/](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/).
6. Henriette Barkow, *The Giant Turnip* (London: Mantra, 2001); Manju Gregory, *The Dragon's Tears* (London: Mantra, 2001); Henriette Barkow, illus. Derek Brazell, *Buri and the Marrow* (London: Mantra, 2001); Nasreen Aktar, *Samira's Eid* (London: Mantra, 2000); Emma Damon, *All Kinds of Beliefs* (London: Mantra, 2000); Henriette Barkow, *That's My Mum* (London: Mantra, 2001); Guido Van Genechten, *Floppy's Friends* (London: Mantra, 2005).
7. Ethnologue.com; Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) *World Factbook*, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html).

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