The Magical Forest of Reading and Writing: Redefining Bilingual Literacy through Hybrid Learning

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EDLD 5317 – Resources for Digital Environments
Fall 2025
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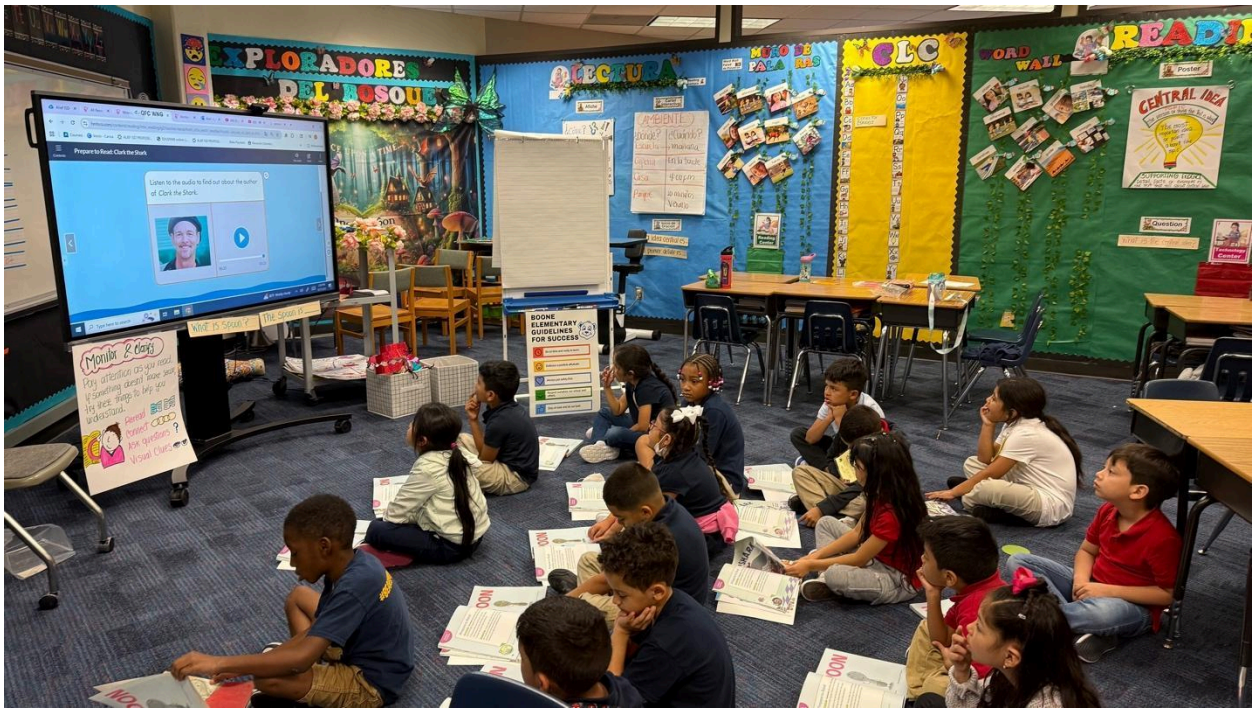
Abstract

Bilingual literacy in elementary education continues to face significant gaps in motivation and performance. The *Explorers of the Forest of Reading and Writing* project introduces a blended model that combines station rotation, adaptive platforms, and playful activities to transform reading and writing instruction in bilingual contexts. Grounded in frameworks such as COVA, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and constructionism, the model integrates digital resources with face-to-face experiences to foster motivation, strengthen reading comprehension, and enhance Spanish writing while building strong foundations for English literacy. This article presents the theoretical foundations, vision, classroom implementation, and lessons learned within a participatory action research process designed to iteratively refine the model and demonstrate its viability and sustainability.

Keywords: Bilingual literacy; Blended learning; Motivation; Action research; *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*.

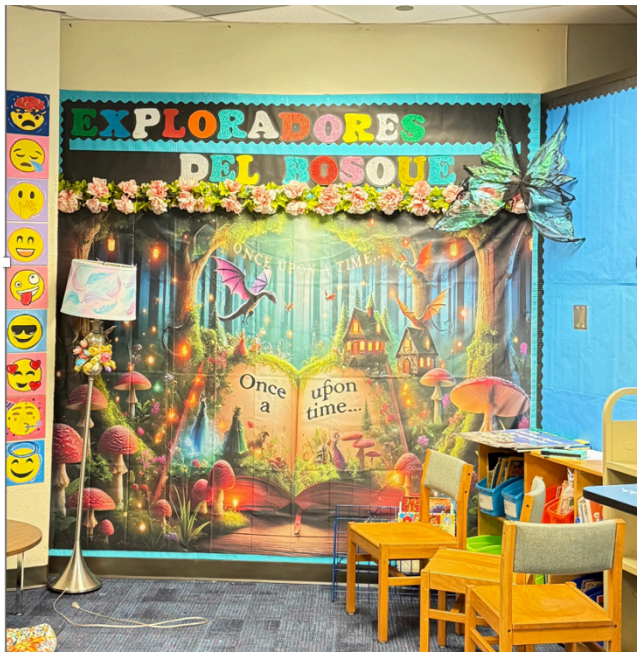


Introduction

In bilingual elementary education, literacy gaps remain a persistent challenge. Although reading and writing are essential for lifelong learning, many students lose motivation when instruction relies on uniform methods. Research shows that bilingual learners require differentiated approaches that value both their first and second languages (August & Shanahan, 2006). Without a strong foundation in the first language, cross-linguistic transfer weakens, limiting comprehension and academic growth (Cummins, 2000).

Blended learning offers a promising response. Beyond combining digital tools with face-to-face instruction, it positions students as active explorers of their learning. Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2017) describe this as disruptive innovation, where technology transforms instruction when intentionally integrated. Hughes and Roblyer (2022) emphasize that its real value emerges when learning takes center stage. This article presents the *Explorers of the Forest of Reading and Writing*, a blended model for second-grade bilingual students designed to make literacy motivating, personalized, and sustainable, closing gaps and strengthening students' confidence as readers and writers.

Theory in Action: The Forest as a Metaphor for Learning



The *Explorers of the Forest of Reading and Writing* project is grounded in an educational vision that integrates theory and practice to transform literacy in bilingual contexts. Its design applies the insights of key educational thinkers and cognitive scientists who remain relevant in the 21st century. From Dewey (1938) it adopts active, meaningful learning; from Bruner (1960), discovery and the spiral nature of knowledge; and from Vygotsky (1978), social mediation as a driver of development. It draws on Piaget's (1952) stages of cognitive growth, Papert's (1980) constructionism, and Schank's (1999) emphasis on prediction, modeling, and reflection. Together, these perspectives shape the forest as a space where students move beyond reading and writing to become active explorers of their own learning.

Where Theory Comes Alive: Magical Stations that Inspire Reading and Writing

The Forest of Reading and Writing stations are implemented in both English and Spanish, aligned with the official curriculum. This bilingual design ensures balance between the two languages and supports cross-linguistic transfer (Cummins, 2000). Each student completes at least four physical and four digital stations per week, earning tickets for participation and

collecting forest coins that can be exchanged in the forest store as part of a gamified recognition system. Recognition of this kind strengthens intrinsic motivation when combined with meaningful tasks (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wang & Tahir, 2020). Students are recognized as explorers and protagonists of their own learning journey. Progress is represented by color levels: red (beginner), orange, yellow, green, and blue (exceeds expectations). This system turns goal attainment into a sequence of challenges and missions, where each success propels the learner to the next level.

- Fairy Tale Corner (Reading Station). A cozy space with physical and digital books, expanded by QR codes linking to online libraries. Motivating, social environments foster reading engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), while diverse texts strengthen bilingual comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Writer's Cave (Writing Station). Explorers write in *Schoology* or notebooks, guided by prompts across genres. This practice enhances creativity and perspective-taking (Galinsky, 2010) and encourages perseverance (Dweck, 2006).
- Workshop of Magic Words (WordWorks Station). Linguistic games with words, sounds, and phonemes strengthen phonological awareness and grammar. Choice fosters autonomy and engagement (Thomas & Brown, 2011), while metalinguistic awareness supports cross-linguistic transfer (Cummins, 2000).
- Digital Explorer's Bridge (Technology Station). Platforms such as *iReady* and *Amplify Reading* personalize learning by color levels, reflecting disruptive innovation (Christensen, Horn & Johnson, 2017) and showing how purposeful technology strengthens motivation and comprehension (Hughes & Roblyer, 2022).
- Inventors' Path (Projects Station). Students create resources such as puppets or digital presentations, later used in dramatizations. This authentic learning (Lombardi, 2007) fosters creativity and problem-solving, consistent with Wagner's (2010) vision of innovation.
- Forest Fairy's Refuge (Small Group Station). The teacher provides personalized guidance at each student's level, building confidence and specific feedback—one of the most effective learning strategies (Brookhart, 2013). It also reflects UDL guidelines, which call for adapting instruction to student diversity (CAST, 2018).

These stations demonstrate how literacy, envisioned as a forest journey, integrates academics with play. As students read, write, play, and create while moving through color levels, they celebrate achievements that strengthen both linguistic abilities and essential life skills such as curiosity, collaboration, resilience, and imagination (Galinsky, 2010; Wagner, 2010).

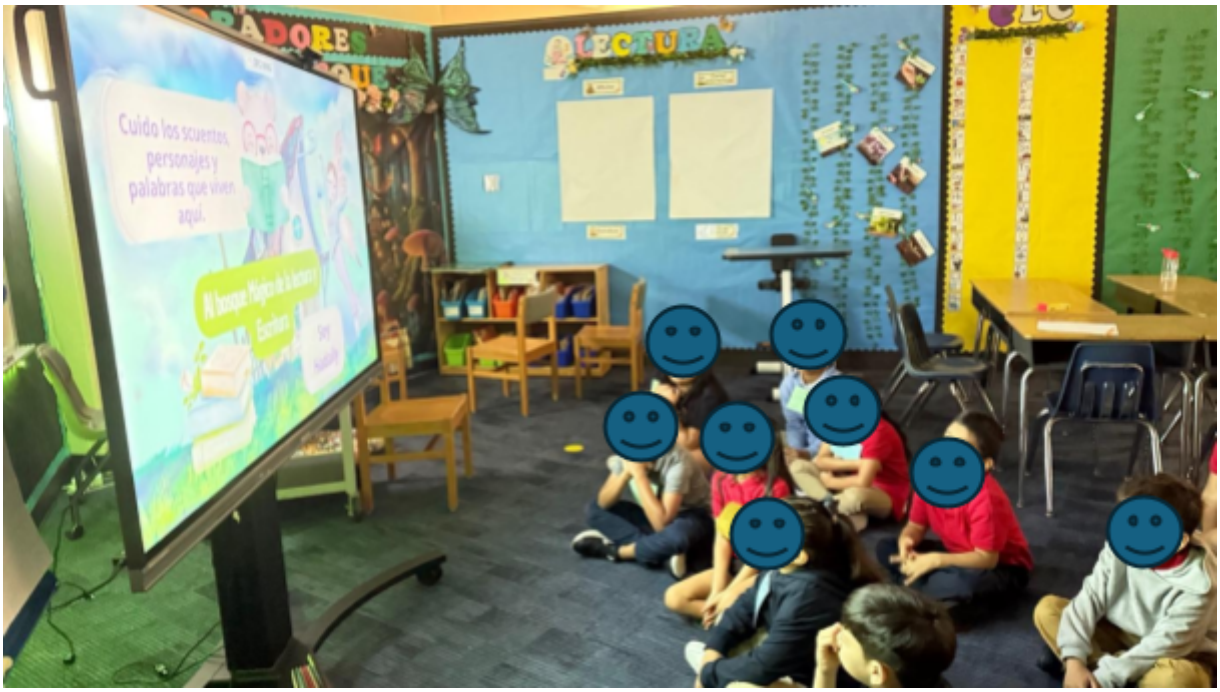
What We Have Learned and What We Still Hope to Discover

The *Forest of Reading and Writing* is currently being implemented as part of an ongoing action research process. Initial findings indicate that blending academics with play significantly contributes to sustaining student motivation. Thematic stations, color levels, and gamified dynamics with tickets and forest coins have helped children see themselves as protagonists of their learning, confirming Deci and Ryan's (1985) claim that recognition, when tied to authentic and meaningful tasks, strengthens intrinsic motivation and promotes more active participation in reading and writing.

A central lesson has been the importance of personalization. The *Forest Fairy's Refuge* provides the opportunity to work in small groups, allowing instruction to be tailored to each student's needs and offering close support for their progress. This strategic space enables children to advance through levels at their own pace, while peers rotate through digital and face-to-face stations. In this way, differentiated instruction merges with autonomous and collaborative learning, producing visible gains in reading and writing and strengthening students' confidence (Brookhart, 2013). At the same time, stations such as the *Writer's Cave* and the *Inventors' Path* illustrate how creativity and imagination, when framed within a playful environment, drive both academic skills and socio-emotional development (Galinsky, 2010; Wagner, 2010).

Looking ahead, the action research process seeks to scale these strategies to other grade levels, adapt them to contexts with limited resources, and examine how levels and rewards can foster resilience and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). It will also be essential to further document how bilingual integration within the stations promotes cross-linguistic transfer (Cummins, 2000), which is central to building sustainable bilingual literacy.

Vision: Learning to Read and Write on a Magical and Challenging Path



The vision is to redefine bilingual literacy as a meaningful, inclusive, and transformative experience in which every child identifies as an explorer on a fun and challenging path that invites them to move forward step by step in reading and writing. Technology is conceived as a bridge to deep learning: it not only motivates but also challenges, personalizes, and expands opportunities to discover and create. In this sense, digital tools and pedagogy intertwine to create experiences where students find joy in challenge and pride in each achievement. Hughes and Roblyer (2022) emphasize that when technology is integrated with pedagogical purpose, it enhances both motivation and academic understanding. Likewise, Christensen, Horn, and

Johnson (2017) argue that disruptive innovation happens when digital tools reconfigure teaching and learning processes, enabling students to take an active role in overcoming challenges and reaching new goals.

Digital Tools that Transform Literacy in the Forest

The Forest of Reading and Writing is supported by a carefully curated ecosystem of digital resources designed to strengthen motivation, personalization, and creativity in the bilingual classroom. These resources are not mere tools but serve as catalysts for deep learning when intentionally aligned with pedagogy. As Roblyer and Hughes (2019) explain, the value of technology lies not in the tool itself but in how it is integrated to transform the teaching and learning experience. Similarly, Graham (2019) emphasizes that blended learning accelerates educational innovation when digital resources are used with clear pedagogical purpose.

- ***iReady.*** An adaptive platform that adjusts reading and writing activities to each student's level, providing personalized practice and real-time progress reports. Its strength lies in enabling teachers to target individual needs and align assignments with color levels, thus supporting differentiation (Means et al., 2010).

- ***Amplify Reading.*** An interactive, story-based resource that builds vocabulary and comprehension through dynamic narratives. Its playful design sustains motivation by showing that reading can be both a challenge and a game (Hughes & Roblyer, 2022).

- ***Schoology.*** A learning management system that organizes assignments, fosters online collaboration, and supports continuous feedback. In the writing station, it becomes a community hub where students read, comment, and co-construct texts, extending interaction beyond the physical classroom (CAST, 2018).

- ***PebbleGo.*** A digital library for elementary learners, offering leveled texts and audio support that promote bilingual literacy and independent reading. Its accessibility makes it an inclusive tool that gives all explorers a voice, regardless of their level (August & Shanahan, 2006).

- ***Kahoot!*** A game-based learning tool that transforms assessment into an engaging, participatory experience. Integrated into the forest, it turns review sessions into collective challenges that reinforce both knowledge and collaboration (Wang & Tahir, 2020).

- ***Adobe Express.*** A creative platform for designing posters, comics, or presentations. With this tool, children express their ideas visually and multimodally, strengthening creative writing and digital communication (Lombardi, 2007).

- ***Genially.*** An interactive content creation tool for gamified activities, presentations, and storytelling. Its integration fosters autonomy and imagination, as students design digital products that affirm their role as authors and creators (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

Together, these resources demonstrate that technology is not limited to motivation but expands the ways students learn, create, and share knowledge. When intentionally integrated into hybrid environments, they strengthen participation and improve reading comprehension, writing, and cross-linguistic transfer. Hughes and Roblyer (2022) emphasize that technology transforms teaching when aligned with clear pedagogical goals. Similarly, Graham (2019) argues that blended learning accelerates innovation by providing personalized and sustainable experiences. Finally, Lombardi (2007) highlights that digital resources, when embedded in authentic contexts, prepare students to solve real-world problems and develop key competencies for the 21st century.

The Forest as Action Research: Sharing Lessons with Others

The *Forest of Reading and Writing* provides a practical and replicable framework for transforming bilingual literacy, aimed not only at students but also at teachers, curriculum specialists, and school leaders who guide instructional processes. By combining adaptive digital resources with physical stations and gamified dynamics, the model demonstrates how to sustain student motivation even in diverse groups with differentiated needs (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; August & Shanahan, 2006).

Today, the forest allows us to model concrete practices that support daily teaching and can be shared with colleagues for replication in different contexts. Strategies such as close feedback in the *Forest Fairy's Refuge*, the use of platforms like *iReady* and *Amplify* to personalize instruction in real time, or the design of playful stations like the *Writer's Cave* and the *Inventors' Path*, serve as tangible examples that other teachers can observe, adapt, and apply. In this way, the forest not only validates its impact in the classroom but also fosters a collaborative learning network among teachers, specialists, and school leaders, promoting creative, challenging, and sustainable educational communities (Brookhart, 2013; CAST, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Critical Thinking and Personal Reflection in the Forest

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Since the innovation plan was implemented, student motivation in reading and writing has increased significantly through gamified and narrative-based activities, confirming that motivation is a central driver of literacy learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). An initial transfer of decoding and comprehension strategies from Spanish to English has also been observed, providing practical evidence of Cummins's (2000) interdependence hypothesis. This finding demonstrates that strengthening the first language not only consolidates the foundations of reading and writing but also paves the way for more solid progress in a second language. These early results are part of an ongoing cycle of implementation, evaluation, and refinement characteristic of action research.

My role as a teacher has also evolved. Rather than transmitting content, I now focus on designing meaningful learning experiences guided by the COVA and UDL frameworks to create flexible, authentic, and student-centered environments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Challenges such as limited infrastructure and the need for ongoing training have been addressed by balancing digital and print resources and through modeling and coaching sessions (Graham, 2019).

Family participation, though still developing, has been strengthened through messages and ClassDojo videos that share progress in reading and writing within the forest and provide clear strategies for families to support learning at home. For the next stage, it is projected to continue working with flyers, simple guides, and instructive videos, so that families not only stay informed but also receive practical guidance to reinforce the digital component and transfer reading and writing skills to their children. In this way, the school-family connection will be strengthened as a foundation for sustaining innovation and ensuring long-term impact (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Conclusion: The Forest as a Future of Literacy Innovation

The Forest of Reading and Writing illustrates that bilingual literacy can become a fun, challenging, and inclusive experience when the richness of physical stations is combined with the power of digital resources. More than a methodological strategy, it represents a paradigm shift that positions students as active explorers of their own learning, capable of moving at their own pace, overcoming challenges, and discovering reading and writing as meaningful adventures.

The emerging findings, within the framework of a participatory action research process, confirm that this model has the potential to reduce gaps in motivation and performance while strengthening students' confidence and autonomy. Its greatest value, however, lies in being a replicable and adaptable approach: a flexible proposal that teachers and educational communities can implement in their own contexts, honoring students' cultural and linguistic diversity.

The call is clear: let us dare to innovate in literacy, to create environments where children not only learn to read and write but also see themselves as protagonists of their own story. As Wagner (2010) emphasizes, students need skills for the future, and Galinsky (2010) reminds us that these skills are nurtured in childhood through creativity, perseverance, and collaboration. Every forest we cultivate in our classrooms becomes a seed of educational transformation with the power to inspire new generations.

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Peer Assessment Rubric – Draft ArticleResources Digital Environments (EDLD-5317-D21)_OL

CRITERIA	Grade		ANGELA	SIMON	TIERRA	KIMBERLY	YUSMILA	FINAL GRADE
Criteria								
Content Knowledge (20 pts)								
Lacks understanding or misuses theories; connections to cognitive science and thought leaders are missing or incorrect.	Does Not Meet Minimum Criteria	8	20	20	20	20	20	20
Exhibits minimal understanding with some connections to theories and concepts; several gaps or inaccuracies present.	Approaches Minimum Criteria	12						
Shows adequate understanding of key theories and cognitive processes with mostly clear connections to the assignment topic; minor gaps or inaccuracies.	Meets Target Criteria	18						
Demonstrates in-depth understanding and insightful application of Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky, Papert, Piaget, and Schank's theories and cognitive science principles. Connections between theory and practice are clear, relevant, and comprehensive.	Exceeds Target Criteria	20						
Critical Thinking (10 pts)								
Ideas are unsubstantiated, unsupported, or missing; references do not align with opinions expressed.	Does Not Meet Minimum Criteria	4	10	10	10	10	10	10
Offers opinions that are weakly supported or inconsistently referenced; connections to content or personal experience are unclear.	Approaches Minimum Criteria	6						
Provides substantiated opinions with adequate references to course content and/or personal experience; mostly supports ideas.	Meets Target Criteria	8						
Presents well-substantiated, original perspectives with numerous explicit references to course content and personal experience; ideas are insightful and thoroughly supported.	Exceeds Target Criteria	10						
Comprehension & APA Formatting (10 pts)								
Few components addressed; major APA formatting errors or omission of citations and references.	Does Not Meet Minimum Criteria	4	8	8	8	8	10	8.4
Some components addressed; APA formatting attempts made but contain noticeable errors that affect clarity.	Approaches Minimum Criteria	6						
Most components addressed satisfactorily; APA formatting errors are minor and do not impede understanding.	Meets Target Criteria	8						
All assignment components addressed clearly and completely; APA 7th Edition formatting is accurate throughout, including citations, references, and overall structure.	Exceeds Target Criteria	10						
Presentation (10 pts)								
Presentation is unclear and disorganized; multimedia distracts or is absent; frequent spelling, grammar, or syntax errors impede understanding.	Does Not Meet Minimum Criteria	4	10	8	10	10	8	9.2
Writing has some clarity and organization issues; multimedia is minimally effective or inconsistently used; language errors detract somewhat.	Approaches Minimum Criteria	6						
Presentation is generally clear and organized with minor lapses; multimedia elements mostly support message; minor language errors present.	Meets Target Criteria	8						
Writing is clear, concise, well-organized, and logically structured;	Exceeds Target	10						
Overall Grade								**47.6**

Overall Grade	47.6

Tierra's Additional Comments: Paula, I like that you have an array of digital tools and that you provide good examples of your implementation. Also check for punctuation in some of your citations like a comma.

Kim-I really love how this article brings theory and practice together in such a creative way. It makes the whole literacy journey feel alive. The “forest” metaphor paired with digital and playful stations is such a smart way to keep bilingual students motivated and engaged.