

# Revisiting Reading Buddies to Support Multilingual Learners and Their Peers

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This article describes a cross-age reading buddies program that was designed to support the language and literacy of multilingual learners and their peers in kindergarten and fourth grade.

Ms. Brown announces, “It’s time for reading buddies!” Her students’ faces light up with joy and excitement. “This is their favorite part of the week,” Ms. Brown, the teacher of a linguistically diverse kindergarten class, says to a member of our research team. As fourth-grade “big” buddies enter the room beaming, they greet their kindergarten “little” buddies with hugs, fist bumps, and high fives and ask enthusiastically about what they have been reading and learning.

Ms. Brown was implementing a reading buddies program designed to support the vocabulary and comprehension of multilingual learners and their peers called the Martha’s True Stories (MTS) Buddies Program (<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/msts/>).<sup>1</sup> Working together with teachers, we developed the program in collaboration with WGBH Boston, the producers of the *Martha Speaks* television series. This series is based on the book entitled *Martha Speaks* (Meddaugh, 1992) about a talking dog named Martha. Leveraging the appeal of the characters in the show and in the book, we used Martha as the canine host of our dog-centric reading buddies program. In the program, Martha taught and learned words and content alongside the participating big and little buddies, all of whom were positioned as both teachers and learners.

As teacher educators and researchers and with teachers and students in local public schools, we developed and evaluated this program over 3 years, during which we (1) designed an initial draft of the curriculum based on what research suggests are effective approaches for supporting vocabulary and comprehension with linguistically diverse learners (Baker et al., 2014); (2) worked with teachers and students to implement the program and made substantial revisions based on our own observations, reflections, and formative assessments as well as

on teacher and student feedback; and (3) evaluated the program using quantitative and qualitative approaches (Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017, 2019; Peercy, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2015; Silverman, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2017).

The resulting 14-week program included teacher-led preparatory lessons and student-led buddy sessions. At the beginning of each week, fourth-grade teachers held one 30- to 45-minute lesson to prepare big buddies to work with the little buddies. In this lesson, teachers previewed the text and the vocabulary and reviewed the buddy lesson plans that big buddies would implement when they met with their little buddies. Kindergarten teachers also held one 30-minute lesson at the beginning of each week to prepare kindergartners to meet with their big buddies. Teachers previewed the books and words and reminded kindergartners to actively participate with their big buddies. Preparing the students beforehand helped them all get excited for working together as well as get ready to have lots of conversation about books and words. Later in the week, big and little buddies met together for about 45 minutes. Big buddies led the session using a student-friendly lesson plan with lesson steps that included (1) reading and

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discussing text, (2) talking about words, and (3) doing an activity together.

In the third year of the project, using a quasi-experimental design, we studied the effects of the program on students' vocabulary and comprehension in 24 linguistically diverse classrooms from four schools in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States (Silverman, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2017). In this study, we administered pre- and post-test vocabulary and comprehension measures to students in classrooms that participated and in classrooms that did not participate in the program and compared the results. We found positive effects across several measures for students in participating classrooms compared to their peers in non-participating classrooms. Schools were particularly interested in effects for a sub-group of multilingual learners who were identified by the school district as "English learners" (ELs). Schools identified students who spoke a language other than or in addition to English in the home and who scored below a level 5 on the ACCESS assessment (<https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/access>) as English learners. When we compared the effects of the program for ELs and all other students, we found no difference in effects, suggesting that the program could be used with EL students.

In this article, we describe the defining features of the MTS Reading Buddies program. First, we discuss the benefits of the cross-age peer learning model. Then, we explain how we supported vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners and their peers within this model. Next, we discuss the research we conducted on the MTS Reading Buddies program. Finally, we provide recommendations for teachers who might consider using an approach such as the one we used to promote vocabulary and comprehension of the multilingual learners and their peers in their classrooms.

## The Benefits of Cross-Age Peer Learning

Theory suggests that language and literacy development is social in nature and that social interaction can facilitate acquisition (Vrikki et al., 2019; Vygotsky,

1978). Furthermore, research suggests that peer-mediated learning can support students' language and literacy development (Leung, 2015). For multilingual learners, drawing on their rich conceptual, cultural, and linguistic resources through conversations with peers can enhance students' learning and engagement in literacy practices (Cole, 2014; Howe &

Abedin, 2013; Martin-Beltrán, 2010, 2014; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Silverman, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2017). Thus, peer-mediated learning provides a rich context for supporting the language and literacy for both multilingual learners and their peers.

Cross-age peer learning, in particular, is a potentially powerful context for supporting vocabulary and comprehension for linguistically diverse learners (Van Keer & Vanderlinde, 2010; Silverman, Kim, et al., 2017; Silverman,

Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2017; Topping et al., 2012). Older children who work with younger children often take on the role of guide, asking questions and extending conversation with their little buddies. It is often said that the best way to learn something is to try to teach it to others. In this way, as older children help younger children learn new words and practice comprehension strategies, they internalize the words and strategies themselves, becoming more independent when reading on their own. For younger children, having individual support and attention from an older peer, who they might look up to, fosters engagement and provides support for learning new words and content. As older and younger children collaborate to negotiate meaning through the use of gestures, facial expressions, and shared explanations, both older and younger children gain a deeper understanding than they would have from just hearing an explanation from their teacher in a whole-group setting.

Why is cross-age peer learning a potentially powerful context for supporting vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners in particular? Multilingual learners bring vast contextual and linguistic knowledge to their interactions with peers (Martin-Beltrán, 2010). The process of negotiating meaning, using their full linguistic repertoire to do so, can facilitate multilingual learners' development

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How could cross-age peer learning support vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners and their peers?
- How could teachers make cross-age peer learning optimally effective for multilingual learners and their peers?
- How could teachers support multilingual learners, in particular, through a cross-age peer learning program designed to promote vocabulary and comprehension?

of metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness, which can be invaluable in navigating language use across contexts, which, in turn, can be supportive of literacy development as well (Martin- Beltrán, 2017). Interactions with older or younger children, regardless of language background, can provide the added challenge of negotiating meaning and understanding across different developmental stages, which can further metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness even more than in same age conversation (Sytsma et al., 2019).

## Supporting the Vocabulary and Comprehension of Multilingual Learners and their Peers

Following research-based principles of effective instruction to support vocabulary and comprehension development among culturally and linguistically diverse students (Baker et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2010), the cross-age peer learning program we developed (a) taught vocabulary words across contexts and through content and supported attention to cognates and the use of translation and translanguaging (i.e., using languages fluidly in communication), (b) introduced and scaffolded word learning and comprehension strategies, and (c) employed a variety of instructional supports including visuals, videos, and digital texts to anchor vocabulary instruction and promote understanding. We describe each of these research-based principles and how they were addressed in the MTS Reading Buddies program below.

### **Teach Vocabulary Words Across Contexts and Through Content and Support Attention to Cognates and the Use of Translation and Translanguaging**

Vocabulary knowledge is a key contributor to reading comprehension (Silverman et al., 2015) and explicit instruction in words can support word learning (Butler et al., 2010). In order to ensure that big buddies and little buddies could build knowledge of words across contexts and content, we used content-focused thematic units to organize the program and concentrated on keywords related to those themes. The units were developed around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) themes. The science theme was Caring for the Environment; the technology theme was Technology All Around Us; the engineering theme was Amazing Inventions; and the math

theme was Everyday Measurement. Within each unit, we included informational fiction and non-fiction traditional texts, digital texts, and videos in order to represent words and content in various ways.

Within each theme, we targeted both general academic and domain-specific vocabulary important to conceptual understanding of the texts. We checked that these words are considered frequent in elementary school-based text (Zeno et al., 1995) and useful for students to know in school (Biemiller, 2010). Words we targeted included *environment*, *habitat*, and *depend*; *technology*, *communicate*, and *transportation*; *inventions*, *inspire*, and *develop*; and *measurement*, *compare*, and *estimate*. We checked the words with teachers to ensure they would be appropriate for both the older and younger students. Teachers felt that even when there were words the older children may already know, explaining them to younger children would help deepen their word knowledge. The words were explicitly taught during the teacher-led sessions and then reviewed during the buddy sessions of the program.

Teachers guided buddy pairs through a routine we called PET, which stood for *Pronounce*, *Explore and Explain*, and *Try it Out*. The steps in the PET routine that teachers guided buddy pairs through are described below.

Pronounce:

- Guide buddy pairs to say the words in English and another language, if known.
- Encourage buddies to consider cognates (words that look and sound similar and have similar meaning) from other languages, when relevant.

Explore and explain:

- Guide big buddies to help little buddies explore the words by talking about meaning, cognates, context clues, word parts, and looking words up in print or digital reference materials.
- Encourage buddies to explain meaning and new definitions using “their own words,” which could include using home languages or translanguaging and their own examples through words, gestures, or other visuals.

Try it out:

- Guide buddies to use the words by sharing examples of the words in other contexts or situations and across languages.
- Encourage buddies to continue using the words throughout the buddies program and beyond (e.g., in other parts of the day or at home).

In each lesson, buddies used this routine for four target words, which we called “buddy words.” See Figure 1 for the way this routine was presented to buddies. However, in encouraging buddies to think about similar words and use the words across contexts, we invited them to consider other additional words that were related to the context and embedded in the texts they encountered. This fostered students’ knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary related to each topic. We also sent home weekly newsletters with the theme as well as the buddy words of the week and included information about cognates and translation for parents to support and extend word learning as well.

By explicitly focusing on vocabulary connections across languages, including cognates and translation on bilingual word cards and encouraging students to use their full linguistic repertoires (e.g., their knowledge in multiple languages and/or varieties) when discussing words, we aimed to center students’ multilingualism as a communicative resource to make meaning of the text and new vocabulary in dialogue with peers (Martin-Beltrán, 2010). Teachers often asked multilingual learners to help explain or read the translation of the focus words, positioning the multilingual students as teachers and explicitly valuing students’ languages other than English in their interactions with peers. We found that multilingual learners were excited to teach other English-dominant students how to say the focal words in Spanish, for example, and we found the younger students were eager to engage in conversation with older students who shared their home language.

### **Introduce and Reinforce Word Learning and Comprehension Strategies**

While teaching words explicitly is an essential part of vocabulary instruction, supporting students in learning strategies that will enable them to learn

words and also construct meaning from text independently is supportive of vocabulary and comprehension development (Hairrell et al., 2011). Thus, in the reading buddies program, teachers taught students ways to learn words on their own and tackle meaning making using key comprehension strategies.

For vocabulary, we embedded two keyword learning strategies that have been effective in prior research in the PET routine discussed above. These are as follows: (1) using meaningful word parts (i.e., morphology) to identify meaning and (2) using context clues to figure out meaning (Baumann et al., 2003). For example, buddies were guided to analyze morphology when they discussed prefixes such as *re-* (*again*) and *de-* (*from, down, off, not*) and how those word parts influenced the meaning of words such as *reuse, recycle, decompose, and decay*.

In order to practice using context clues, the older students were encouraged to re-read the texts with their younger students to find examples or other ways to express the focus words and encourage the younger buddies to work like a detective searching for clues to solve a case. For example, after reading the following text, “What if you didn’t throw your soup can in the garbage? What if you washed the can and reused it instead? If you reused your soup can, you could turn it into a flower vase,” buddies discussed the clues in the text and could work together to deduce that the keyword “reuse” has something to do with “using again.”

In addition, older students were guided to teach their younger buddies strategies that have been shown to support reading comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010). Using the acronym PAWS, students were taught to Prepare to read (i.e., preview and predict), Ask and answer questions, and Wrap it up with a Summary. Teachers guided students to use this strategy with each other to ensure they understood the text at hand. See Figure 2 for the way PAWS was

**Figure 1**  
**The PET Routine to Support Vocabulary**



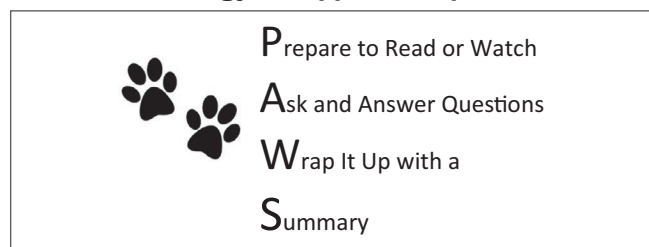
**P**ronounce: Say the word out loud and think about similar words in English or other languages.

**E**xplore and explain: Look for word clues and check other references then talk about the meaning in the book or video.

**T**ry it out: Talk about other examples and related words and use the words over and over again.



**Figure 2**  
**The PAWS Strategy to Support Comprehension**



presented to students. The steps in the PAWS strategy that teachers guided students through were as follows:

Prepare to read:

- Guide buddies to read the title and consider what they already know about the topic.
- Guide buddies to talk about what they think the text might be about.

Ask and Answer

- Guide buddies to ask and answer questions about the text together.
- Encourage buddies to use examples from the text and their own knowledge and experience to answer questions they come up with together.

Wrap it Up with a Summary

- Guide buddies to summarize the text together by asking each other about what they remembered happened first, next, and last or what they thought were the main idea and important details.
- Invite buddies to write and illustrate their summary together so they can remember the text later.

To implement the PAWS strategy, teachers taught big buddies to ask their little buddies questions such as, “What do you think this will be about?” “What questions do you have about what has happened so far?” and “What was this all about? What did we learn?” In learning to guide younger students through these steps of the strategy, we observed older students taking ownership of these reading strategies independently. Even if older students were familiar with these reading strategies, engaging in dialogue with peers (using their wider linguistic repertoire or “their own words”) afforded a shared learning space to think aloud and

deepen their own understanding. When students are offered the opportunity to teach others and talk about their learning strategies, learners are able to externalize their learning, which supports further development of their own metacognitive literacy skills (Mercer & Howe, 2012).

Knowing that the kindergarten teachers we worked with typically teach comprehension strategies during whole-group read-alouds without many opportunities for younger students to use the strategies themselves, we aimed to provide time and support for the younger students to practice using comprehension strategies. Therefore, during “reading buddies time,” kindergarten students were able to practice comprehension strategies together with their older peers who would model, scaffold, and allow for back-and-forth dialogue as they read together. As the younger students were sharing the reading experience (one-on-one) with an older peer, they were afforded more opportunities to co-construct meaning from the text and participate in using the comprehension strategies that we hoped would prepare them for using the strategies as they became more proficient readers themselves.

By encouraging students to use languages other than English and translanguaging in discussions about words and text, we invited multilingual learners to participate in ways that were meaningful and offered opportunities for students from different language backgrounds to learn from each other. Vocabulary and comprehension strategies transfer across languages and can be used in whatever language students are speaking and reading. We hoped that by practicing and supporting each other in using strategies across languages, students would ultimately become stronger and more independent readers in any language.

### ***Employ a Variety of Instructional Supports Including Visuals, Videos, and Digital Texts to Anchor Vocabulary Instruction and Promote Understanding***

Beyond encouraging the multilingual students in the program to use their full linguistic repertoire, we wanted to use multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement throughout the program to ensure access to content and context for all who participated (Meyer et al., 2014). Therefore, we intentionally included multimodal texts, print texts, interactive digital texts, and videos to present content

and context in different ways. Previous research has shown that using different types of multimedia can benefit word learning and comprehension for all students and multilingual learners in particular (Silverman et al., 2019).

The program also built in opportunities for students to express themselves in multiple ways. In teacher-led lessons, in which teachers met with big buddies or little buddies separately, teachers encouraged big buddies and little buddies to “think-pair-share” so they could talk with same-age peers in pairs and in whole-group configurations about what they were learning. Then buddies met with cross-age peers to read, watch, and discuss. Additionally, buddies had the opportunity to write, draw, and even act out their responses to texts they read or watched.

To foster engagement, we used a mix of teacher-led and student-led formats as well as a mix of traditional reading/watching and discussing and more interactive game-like activities. For example, students played picture and word matching games, concept and word sorting games, and synonym/antonym search games to support vocabulary learning. We also encouraged students to set goals (e.g., learn a new word, share a personal experience) and provided tools for collaboration and self-regulation including checklists and reflection questions to help buddies manage their time and think about how they could work together better each session. For example, big buddies used a checklist to check off different parts of the lesson to help with time management, and, after each lesson, they reflected on whether they collaborated with their little buddy by sharing and encouraging participation in a respectful way. Little buddies were also asked to reflect on their lessons by considering whether they listened to their big buddy, shared their ideas, and asked for help when they needed it.

Considering a focus of our program was specifically on supporting multilingual learners, we intentionally included multiple languages as we introduced words and content. Most of our multilingual students spoke Spanish in addition to English so we included vocabulary definitions and text synopses in both languages. We also encouraged students to use multiple languages in discussing words and context. Finally, we used examples that were linguistically and culturally relevant to engage the multilingual learners in the program.

## Research on the MTS Reading Buddies Program

In order to test out the effectiveness of this program for supporting vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners and their peers in elementary school, we conducted a quasi-experimental study with 12 classrooms (six kindergarten and six fourth grade) in an intervention group and 12 classrooms (six kindergarten and six fourth grade) in a comparison group (Silverman, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2017). Teachers in the intervention group implemented the MTS Reading Buddies program. Teachers in the comparison group conducted business as usual, which did not include using a cross-age reading buddy program.

We first conducted a professional development workshop for the teachers in the intervention group so they could learn and discuss how to implement the program. We followed this workshop with monthly check-in meetings with teachers. Teachers found it valuable to meet with colleagues who were implementing the program at their own grade level (e.g., kindergarten teachers talking with other kindergarten teachers) as well as with their peers who were implementing the program at the other grade level (e.g., fourth-grade teachers talking with kindergarten teachers). These cross-grade meetings facilitated program implementation and fostered collaboration across grade levels, which is not always common in elementary schools (Percy, Martin-Beltrán, et al., 2015).

We recruited students in participating teachers' classes to take part in the study. While all children participated in the program as part of their regular classroom instruction, we, the research team, only observed and assessed students whose parents consented to their participation in the research. Of the students in the final study sample, 63% were Latinx, 25% were Black, 4% were White, and 5% were classified as Other Race. We did not have race/ethnicity data on 3% of the students in the sample. Overall, 62% of the sample was multilingual, with 50% of kindergartners and 20% of fourth graders designated by the school district as EL. (Note that many multilingual fourth-grade students had been labeled as EL in earlier grades but were no longer labeled as such by upper elementary school because, using the ACCESS assessment, the district determined they were English proficient.) We assessed students in both the intervention group and the comparison group with measures that were specifically developed to be

aligned with the program and measures that were not directly aligned with the program. See Tables 1 and 2 for a list of measures we administered. Because all instruction in the schools where we implemented the program was conducted in English only, to be able to use the same assessments across students in the study, and to minimize assessment time, we administered assessments only English assessments. However, we would like to assess students in multiple languages in future research.

To prepare for implementation, we worked with teachers in the intervention group to pair big and little buddies. We encouraged the fourth-grade and kindergarten teachers to work together to do the pairing. We provided suggestions for pairing focused on academics as well as social skills and linguistic background. For example, we suggested pairing academically strong and socially mature big buddies with little buddies who might need extra support because we figured these big buddies would be best situated to provide the additional scaffolding these little buddies needed. We also suggested pairing big and little buddies who shared home languages so they could tap into their wider linguistic repertoire (languages other than English) during their interactions. Note that there were ultimately many different configurations of buddy pairs.

We also asked teachers to observe, redirect, and encourage as needed to support buddy pairs in being successful together. Teachers monitored buddies working together and either intervened or repaired if partners were unproductive together. For example, when teachers noticed interactions where younger

students were not actively participating, they would encourage older students to ask questions and provide wait time. They would also encourage the kindergarteners to ask clarifying questions when they did not understand or needed help.

Teachers implemented the program for 14 weeks. At the end of this time, we assessed all of the students in both the intervention and comparison groups again. We compared results across the intervention and comparison groups, controlling for pre-test differences. We found that, on measures aligned to the program, both kindergarteners and fourth graders in the intervention group outperformed those in the comparison group. This was expected since the students in the intervention group were taught those words while children in the comparison group were not. We also found differences on two measures not aligned to the program. We found that kindergarteners in the intervention group outperformed kindergarteners in the comparison group on a norm-referenced measure of vocabulary, and fourth graders in the intervention group outperformed kindergarteners in the comparison group on a researcher designed measure of reading comprehension that was not aligned to the program. We did not find significant differences between the two groups on other measures. In general, effects were similar across students identified as EL and those who were not.

Interviews with teachers and students in the program suggest that teachers found the program easy to implement and students found the program engaging. As Ms. Brown noted, many

**Table 1**  
**Kindergarten Measures**

Assessment	Description
<b>Program-Aligned Measures</b>	
Researcher-Developed Receptive Assessment	Students are shown four pictures and asked to choose the picture that best answers a question about a target word.
Researcher-Developed Expressive Assessment	Students are asked to explain the meaning of a target word. Answers are scored for accuracy.
<b>Non-Aligned Measures</b>	
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 2007)	On this norm-referenced measure, students are shown a set of four pictures and given a one-word stimulus. They choose the picture that best matches the word.
Researcher-Developed Comprehension Test	Students listen to a text on a topic not covered in the program and answer open-ended questions about the text. Answers are scored for accuracy.

**Table 2**  
**Fourth-Grade Measures**

Assessment	Description
<b>Program-Aligned Measures</b>	
Researcher-Developed Receptive Assessment	Students read and respond to multiple choice questions asking about the synonyms of target words.
Researcher-Developed Expressive Assessment	Students are prompted to write the definition of target words. Answers are scored for accuracy.
<b>Non-Aligned Measures</b>	
Gates MacGinitie Reading Test (MacGinitie et al., 2006)	On this norm-referenced measure, students read and respond to multiple choice vocabulary and comprehension questions.
Researcher-Developed Comprehension Test	Students read a text on a topic not covered in the program and answer open-ended questions about the text. Answers are scored for accuracy.

students reported that the buddies sessions were their favorite part of the week. We suspect that if the program had been implemented over a longer period of time (e.g., the whole year or across multiple years), the program could have been even more effective. While more research is needed, the findings from this study suggest that the MTS Reading Buddies program could serve as a model for how teachers could implement cross-age peer learning programs to support the vocabulary and comprehension of multilingual learners and their peers in linguistically diverse elementary school settings.

## Recommendations for Implementing the MTS Reading Buddies Program

As we worked with teachers to implement the MTS Reading Buddies Program, we learned a lot about how to implement an effective reading buddies program for multilingual learners and their peers. While the materials for the MTS Reading Buddies program are available for free on PBS Learning Media, teachers can design their own programs around the themes and content that fit best in their context. Based on lessons we learned from implementing the MTS Reading Buddies program, we provide below recommendations for educators who might want to implement a program like this in their schools or contexts.

1. Set expectations, provide modeling and guidance for buddy interactions, and facilitate engagement.

A major lesson we learned was that the teachers played a critical role in setting expectations,

modeling and guiding buddy interaction, and fostering student engagement. While there are likely benefits of pairing older and younger students together to read without explicitly pre-teaching older students, we found that in classrooms in which the teacher played a strong role in preparing students before interactions and supporting students during interactions, buddy pairs were more successful. We found that students were able to offer social, linguistic, and cognitive discursive supports in their moment-to-moment interactions with buddies and we suggest that teachers can listen for, acknowledge, and encourage these kinds of supports (see Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017, for examples). We also found that when teachers encouraged students to collaborate to understand the text together rather than simply to complete a task, students had richer opportunities for elaborated language (Daniel et al., 2015; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2017).

2. Collaborate and coordinate across grade levels.

Another lesson we learned was that collaboration and coordination across teachers and across grade levels was key. Practical issues such as scheduling, pairing, and monitoring progress were handled smoothly when teachers of kindergarten and fourth-grade students met often to talk about how the program was going and worked together to make changes when needed, especially when buddy pairs seemed to be having difficulty working together. For example, when teachers noticed that a big buddy was talking a lot but the little buddy was not, the older students' teacher taught the fourth grader how to ask open-ended questions and provide contingent



scaffolding (i.e., just enough and not too much, see Daniel et al., 2015). In parallel, the kindergarten teacher prepared the younger student for the buddy sessions by building upon their background knowledge and brainstorming questions about the topic ahead of time so they would be more confident to share with their older buddies.

3. Be intentional about supporting vocabulary and comprehension.

We also learned that it was important to be intentional about supporting vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners and their peers, using research-based practices in this cross-age peer learning context. Since some of the teachers had experience with reading buddies programs in which the focus was on decoding or fluency, the approach of having students not just read together but also talk about words and content together was new to them. Therefore, in meetings with the teachers, we talked about how to support word and content learning and how to encourage student to student discussion about the words and content by asking open-ended questions and encouraging buddies to talk to each other about what they were reading or learning. For multilingual learners, we found that intentional support for noticing cognates and translating text or translanguaging with peers was important, and for all learners, using multimedia was a great way to support word and content learning. Importantly, being intentional about supporting vocabulary and comprehension means making space for extended opportunities for talk among both same age and cross-age peers.

## Conclusion

By revisiting a cross-age peer learning approach used widely in schools and infusing it with structure and a focus on supporting vocabulary and comprehension for multilingual learners and their peers, we created an inclusive opportunity for students to engage and interact in ways that supported their word and content learning. By designing the program with multilingual students in mind, we were able to provide all students with rich learning opportunities that they looked forward to each week. As teachers look for innovative ways to support the language and literacy of their linguistically diverse students, they should consider whether using a cross-age learning

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Partner with a teacher from another grade level at your school to implement a cross-age peer learning program.
2. Choose engaging, multimodal texts, ideally ones that build on students' backgrounds and are thematically related to foster learning content across contexts.
3. Prepare both teacher-led and student-led lessons to support students' vocabulary and comprehension development.
4. Include specific support for multilingual learners including opportunities to use students' wider linguistic repertoire. For example, encourage students to use home languages and translanguaging in peer discussions and to notice cognates and comparisons across languages.
5. Observe peer interactions and offer feedback to encourage responsive scaffolding (Daniel et al., 2015). Encourage equitable student participation and opportunities to use new language related to texts. Reflect on peer discussions and make changes to be optimally responsive to students' needs.

approach such as the one we used in this reading buddies program might benefit their students.

## Conflict of Interest

None

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The students participating in this program brought an array of linguistic gifts and competencies. Multilingual learners were students who used more than one language across home and school contexts and included students designated as English learners and students designated as English proficient. Our use of the term "multilingual learner" is to foreground the multiple linguistic resources of such learners rather than focusing narrowly on English proficiency (see Kibler & Valdes, 2016; Martinez, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2016). Even among multilingual students' peers, who were considered speakers of English only, many spoke vernaculars that went unrecognized at school.

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