

## **Sharing the Bilingual Journey: Situational Autobiography in a Family Literacy Context**

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### **Abstract**

Situational autobiography is a methodology that encourages the exploration of the situational factors affecting bilingual learners. Learners write narratives that scrutinize the factors affecting their struggles of adjustment and language acquisition. In this study, an adult learner in a family literacy classroom completed three situational autobiography chapters on language development, friends and community, and school experiences. The learner also implemented lessons using the same themes with her two children at home. The written products of the adult learner and her two children, written commentaries by the teacher-researcher (T-R), and interviews with the adult learner were analyzed to determine (a) what the T-R learned about the adult learner; (b) what the adult learner learned about her children; and (c) what effect both projects had on the adult learner. Findings support earlier claims that knowledge of learners' backgrounds and an understanding of the social context in which languages are developed are essential to providing quality education. Also revealed is the healing effect that situational autobiography may have on people struggling with adjustment to a new culture. Finally, situational autobiography as a shared literacy activity can promote discussion that enables parents to support more fully their children's development as bilinguals and to understand their own progress in acquiring a new language and culture.

When facing the challenges of adjustment to a new environment, bilingual and immigrant students often blame themselves, their language, and their culture for things that happen to them. Situational autobiographies turn problematic circumstances into opportunities for learning, as students reflect

on situational factors influencing their lives as immigrant students. This process helps them to understand that “the problems of living in a new culture are . . . the result of social factors rather than of personal shortcomings” (Benesch, 1993, p. 249).

Situational autobiographies transcend discussions of students’ immediate life experiences. The world of bilingual students is affected by linguistic, cultural, economic, political, and social factors (Brisk, 1998). Students writing situational autobiographies explore objectively these situational factors. The purpose of such exploration is to help students understand that what is happening to them is related to time and place and not inherent to their specific language, culture, or ethnic group. Students do not have control of these factors but can control their own reaction. Objective analysis of these factors helps students react in a constructive way to their present circumstances.

Situational autobiography projects also facilitate literacy development because students make ample use of oral and written language in an academic context. “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). Situational autobiographies respond to this broader view of literacy, which reads “the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) as bilingual students objectively exploring their own world through reading, writing, and discussion.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of situational autobiography as both a traditional classroom activity and a parent/child shared literacy activity. A learner in an adult family literacy classroom completed three situational autobiography chapters on language development, friends and community, and school experiences. The adult learner then explored the same themes with her two children at home. What is unique about this study is its intent to extend the discussion of the situational factors affecting bilinguals beyond the school classroom and into the home by examining the use of situational autobiography in a family literacy context.

### **Exploring Students’ Lives Through Autobiography**

Benesch (1993) uses the term “critical autobiography” to refer to the exploration of external factors influencing the lives of immigrant students through autobiography. Several studies have explored the use of critical autobiography in classroom settings. Findings obtained when a critical autobiography project was implemented with adult immigrants showed that critical autobiography helped bilingual learners to recognize that factors affecting them were not a result of any wrongdoing or deficiency on their part (Benesch, 1993). In another study, students in a fifth-grade, Spanish-English bilingual classroom gained insight into patterns of language use in their communities and attitudes toward immigrants in the United States through the writing of critical autobiographies (Brisk & Simsarian, 2000).

Brisk and Zandman (1995) also reported the positive changes in school behavior exhibited by Galina, a second-grade Russian immigrant via Israel, after she wrote a critical autobiography. She was uncooperative and aggressive and refused to speak Russian to her mother, or Hebrew to the bilingual teacher. An analysis of the three countries where she had lived and the language used in each helped her to understand her complex linguistic and cultural development. She switched to functioning in her three languages (Russian, Hebrew, and English), improved her relationship with her mother, and became an overall better student.

In a broader study, Brisk (1998) examined the implementation of critical autobiography projects and the effects on learners in four distinct contexts: a fifth-grade class, a sixth-grade class, a high school ESL class, and a reading recovery tutorial session. In all cases, results indicated that students and teachers learned that the feelings of isolation that may accompany adjustment to a new culture are quite common and often have much to do with the majority culture's attitudes toward minority cultures in the United States. Critical autobiography writing allowed learners to look beyond their own individual lives and gain an understanding of the situational factors that influence their daily experiences.

### **Situational Factors Affecting Bilingual Learners**

Establishing an extensive understanding of learners, their backgrounds, and the attitudes affecting their learning is essential for quality education. Sizer (1984) highlighted the importance of allowing personal knowledge of students to impact instruction, rather than imposing a particular curriculum on a group of students. Brisk (1998) expanded on the notion of using students' backgrounds as sources of knowledge to build upon, specifically in the case of bilingual and bicultural learners:

Of paramount importance is to treat and view students as bilingual individuals who have a cultural background that, although different and often in conflict with mainstream America, is still the basis of the students' knowledge. Students cannot be treated as empty vessels to be filled, but as containers rich with knowledge to be added and expanded. (p. 65)

Moreover, Brisk insisted that in addition to family and individual factors, teachers must be cognizant of the situational factors that influence bilinguals' educational experiences. Spolsky (1978) described these factors as being linguistic, cultural, economic, political, social, and psychological in nature. Linguistic factors include the nature of languages and use of each language. Language characteristics and use help promote some languages and not others. For example, world and standardized languages hold a more prominent place in society; the type of writing system raises questions as to the feasibility of teaching students certain languages. Culture of the society at large determines

the content of school curricula, assumptions on students' background knowledge, and ways of communicating, disciplining, and behaving. Economic and political factors, in the form of language policies, immigration policies, and opportunities for social and economic mobility play a major role in the lives of bilingual learners and their families. Finally, the status of languages (or dialects) and their speakers, socio-economic level, race, gender, and reasons for being in the United States shape the attitudes and expectations of teachers toward bilingual students.

This study addressed specific aspects of the linguistic, social, and cultural factors that affect bilinguals. In a critique of various research methodologies that fail to capture individual differences among bilinguals, Grosjean (1997) explains that the knowledge of numerous language-related factors is essential to understanding the development of bilinguals. One such factor is language history, that is to say, how and when languages were acquired, in what context they were acquired, and what the pattern of language use was over time. The second is language stability, meaning to what extent one or more of the languages is still being acquired or the degree to which language skills are continuing to change. The concept of function is also critical when discussing linguistic factors. One must know which languages a bilingual uses, in what contexts, for what purposes, and to what extent. The amount of L1 used at home, as an example, is a factor which affects a bilingual's acquisition of and proficiency in that language (Hernández-Chavez, 1978). Finally, the nature of the languages and the extent to which these languages are used outside the school influences school policies and practices as well as the language proficiency of students (Brisk, 1998). Hence, information about the development, type, function, and use of languages by bilinguals can provide insight into their experiences and performance.

Tied in to the notion of language function and the way in which languages are viewed in a community are various social factors that affect bilinguals. Social factors may affect the attitudes of students and their families toward their home language and English (Corson, 2001). Size and cohesiveness of the community also affect families' adjustment and impact language proficiency and social integration (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Ties to the homeland and expected length of stay influence motivation to learn English and maintain the home language (Brisk, 1998). Even in settings in which L2 learners are exposed to the target language in everyday life, only those learners who establish friendships with members of the L2 culture will make significant progress with the language (Schumann, 1986). Attitude and motivation, which are strongly influenced by formation of friendships with members of the target language culture, are key factors in a bilingual's development. In a study of a two-way bilingual program in Mexico, Graham and Brown (1996) discovered that Mexican students who made the most progress with English were those who made friendships with native English speakers.

Cultural factors that affect learners have been the guiding force for many investigations of the ways in which incongruities between cultures and values of home and school can impact educational experiences. The dominant American culture shapes most educational settings in the United States. Yet Heath's landmark work, *Ways With Words* (1983), proved that even within the majority language culture, such incongruities exist and can influence learners' success or failure. Much research has explored this same concept specifically as it applies to ethnic diversity and bilingual learners. In a compilation of ethnographic studies, Saravia-Shore and Arvizu (1992) explored the ways in which communication styles differ between students' home and school cultures. They suggest that teachers must be cognizant of these incongruities and alter teaching strategies accordingly. For example, in a classroom in Kamehameha, Hawaii, a teacher needed to go through a "process of adaptation" (p. 11) in which she allowed students' home culture practices, for example, allowing students to take over certain tasks, to become a part of the classroom routine (Jordan, Tharp, & Baird-Vogt, 1992).

Knowledge of such issues and the various situational factors affecting bilingual learners must inform teachers' instruction and guide the development of classroom practices that can maximize students' success.

### **Family Literacy**

This study suggests that situational autobiography may be beneficial not only for learners and teachers but also for parents and children. A fundamental aspect of family literacy is that literacy activity within the context of daily family routines is just as important as that which occurs in formal school settings (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995). This does not mean, however, that parents must be taught how to alter their routines to replicate school activities and drills (Auerbach, 1989). Parents are not at a deficit with regard to the literacy behaviors they are qualified to transmit to their children (Taylor, 1993). Instead, the educational community must learn to appreciate the funds of knowledge that families possess and the variety of literacy activities in which they engage (Moll, 1990).

Broader and more accurate understanding of the literacy activity that occurs at home can work in favor of minority families in particular, who may at times feel alienated from their children's school experiences because of language-related barriers to communication or culture-related differences in the definition of "parental involvement" in education (Valdés, 1996). There is evidence to suggest that home literacy portfolios, for instance, can provide teachers with information about important literacy activities in which minority parents and children engage at home (Paratore, Homza, Krol-Sinclair, Lewis-Barrow, Melzi, Stergis, & Haynes, 1995; Paratore, Hindin, Krol-Sinclair, & Durán, 1998).

Auerbach (1989) has suggested that family literacy programs working with bilingual parents would benefit from reading and writing activities that investigate home language use, explore cultural issues, and examine issues of learning and teaching. Such activities help to answer the question of how educators can draw on parents' knowledge and experience to inform instruction rather than how school practices can be transferred into the home (p. 177). Situational autobiography in a family literacy context may provide one way of gaining such insight into the lives and literacy practices of bilingual families as well as promote some of the "neglected" aspects of family literacy that Auerbach points out, such as using literacy to address family or community problems and supporting the development of the home language and culture (1989, p. 178).

### **Research Questions**

The study was designed to look at situational autobiography from several perspectives, including those of the teacher-researcher (T-R), an adult learner, and her children. Three questions were established to guide the research:

1. When a situational autobiography project is implemented in an adult family literacy classroom, what does a teacher-researcher (T-R) learn about the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting an adult bilingual learner?
2. When the adult learner implements a situational autobiography project at home, what does she learn about the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting her children?
3. What is the effect of both projects on an adult learner's understanding of the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting her as a bilingual?

### **Methodology**

#### **Context**

The adult portion of the situational autobiography project was implemented within an adult family literacy class consisting of 25 bilingual learners from various countries. The class was co-taught by two teachers, both graduate students in education at a local university; three undergraduate tutors also assisted with small group work.

The family literacy program in which the study was conducted serves members of the community of Oceanside (pseudonym), an area in the environs of a large, metropolitan east coast city. Oceanside is a working class community in which 85% of elementary-school children are identified as members of low-income families. Oceanside's population is ethnically diverse (57% Hispanic, 20% Southeast Asian, and 23% other), with 28% of families having arrived in the community from other countries after 1980. As a result, all of the participants in the family literacy program were

native speakers of Spanish and various other languages, such as Vietnamese, Somali, and Bosnian. The mean formal education level of participants in the program was 8.9 years. All participants were primary caregivers, in most cases parents or grandparents, of children who were or would later be students in the local public school system.

### Participants

A case study methodology was selected for the purpose of looking in-depth at the effects of the situational autobiography project on one learner and her children. Cristina (pseudonym), the adult learner participant, is a 40-year-old woman who was born in the Dominican Republic. She received twelve years of formal schooling in Santo Domingo. After high school she worked part-time and at one point aspired to go to medical school. As a newlywed at the age of 28, she moved to Puerto Rico with her husband, Juan (pseudonym); they remained there for ten years. In 1996, Cristina came to Oceanside from Puerto Rico with Juan and their two children, Carlos and Marie (pseudonyms). Cristina attends the family literacy class four mornings a week and works as a cleaning woman at night. While Cristina's Spanish literacy skills are quite well developed, prior to the implementation of the situational autobiography project she often appeared reluctant to improve her spoken or written English. She insisted on responding to in-class readings through writing or speaking in her native language, even when most class members were making attempts to progress with both L1 and L2 skills. Cristina's son, Carlos, is nine years old and a fourth-grader in a transitional bilingual education classroom where he is gradually developing literacy skills in both English and Spanish. Cristina's daughter, Marie, who is five years old, is in a transitional bilingual education kindergarten class.

### Procedures

In order to study the effects of situational autobiography on Cristina, the adult learner, three situational autobiography lessons were implemented in the adult family literacy classroom. The lesson plans were implemented one per week, during two-hour class sessions each Wednesday and Thursday (a total of four hours per week), over the course of a three-week period. The entire adult class participated in the writing of situational autobiographies. In order to examine the use of situational autobiography as a shared literacy activity, Cristina also received a lesson to take home to implement with her children each Thursday. Both children completed them with their mother's help over the weekend or when time permitted.

### Intervention

Since the T-R wished to focus on linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting the learner and her children, she designed lesson plans that would elicit discussion and writings around three themes: the development and

daily use of the learner's second language; friends and community; and school experiences. Also taken into account in selecting themes were the co-teacher's input about what topics would interest learners and which themes would lend themselves to being developed into take-home lessons for children.

Each lesson plan for the adult class included objectives related to the theme: a pre-writing exploration of the theme with the whole class using a poetry reading to stimulate discussion; small group reading and discussion of the poem; a description of the assigned writing activity; teacher modeling of the writing assignment; creation of a first draft; peer editing; rewriting; revising for grammar; and typing a final, publishable version on the computer (see Appendix A for a sample lesson plan). The take-home lessons for children were very similar, except that they also suggested the sharing of a children's book to stimulate discussion and asked the parent to share her own writing with the children instead of the teacher's writing (see Appendix B). For all lessons, writers were encouraged to use any language to communicate their thoughts.

### Data Collection and Analysis

All situational autobiography class sessions were audiotaped. The T-R also made written notes about what Cristina said in class during the course of the project. Cristina's writings and her children's writings were photocopied and placed in a binder for analysis. The T-R interviewed Cristina following the completion of each take-home lesson to glean information about (a) what happened when she implemented the lesson at home and what she had learned about the situational factors affecting her children, and (b) what effects both projects had on her understanding of her own situation as a bilingual. These discussions were also audiotaped. All the data sources were coded for themes related to information gained about the adult learner, what the parent learned about her children, and the effects of the project on the adult learner.

### **Results: Cristina's Situational Autobiography**

Results of the study revealed Cristina's attitude toward learning English, opportunities for daily L2 use, the role of social context on her proficiency, and comments on the structure of classrooms in the United States.

As a child, Cristina was enrolled in an English class in the Dominican Republic, but she was not interested in learning English and often skipped class. She wrote, "*Cuando yo estaba en la primaria recibía una hora de inglés diaria, pero yo no ponía interés en aprenderlo y salía del salón con algunas de mis compañeras de clase a correr moto y bicicleta.*" [When I was in elementary school I used to get an hour of English every day, but I wasn't interested in learning it and I used to leave the classroom with my friends and go motorcycling and biking.] She further expressed the regret she feels at not having taken advantage of the opportunities afforded to her: "*No sabía el daño que me estaba haciendo porque nunca yo pensé que iba a vivir en los*

*Estados Unidos. Hoy me y arrepiento y no quiero que mis hijos vivan esta experiencia.*” [I didn’t know the damage I was doing to myself because I never thought I was going to live in the United States. Now I regret it, and I don’t want my children to have the same experience.] During the course of the situational autobiography project, Cristina also shared some of the feelings she had about learning a second language: “*Cuando pronuncio algunas palabras en inglés me siento que hay otra persona dentro de mí.*” [When I pronounce certain words in English I feel like there’s another person inside of me.] Cristina gets occasional chances to practice her English skills during appointments with Americans, in school, on the street, on TV, in her work, and with her children. In general, however, her use of English is quite minimal. Cristina explained that at work, for example, her use of English is limited: “*Cuando llego a mi trabajo vuelvo a escuchar el idioma español porque todos somos hispanos en el lugar que trabajo.*” [When I get to work I go back to hearing Spanish because we’re all Hispanic in the place where I work.]

At home Cristina’s use of English is not much greater: “*Sigo usando el español en mi casa hablando con mi familia.*” [I continue to use Spanish at home when I’m speaking with my family.] Cristina further described the occasional role reversal that takes place in her household when she does opt to study or practice her English. She said, “*Cuando yo le pregunto a mi hijo, Carlos, algunas palabras que no entiendo, el me dice, ‘Yo no soy tu maestro. Si me compras algo te digo.’ En cambio, mi hija, Marie, me dice el significado de la palabra y no me pide nada.*” [When I ask my son, Carlos, certain words in English, he says, ‘I’m not your teacher. If you buy me something I’ll tell you.’ On the other hand, my daughter, Marie, tells me the meaning of the word and doesn’t ask for anything.]

From the social standpoint, Cristina appears to have close relationships and friendships only with people who can communicate in Spanish. These friendships are not always limited to natives of her own country, but generally she has established close ties in the community with people who share her native language. Cristina described her best friend saying, “*Mi mejor amiga en la comunidad se llama Diana [pseudonym]. Ella es de Guatemala. Cuando yo llegué a Oceanside ella fue la persona que me dio apoyo.*” [My best friend in the community is named Diana. She’s from Guatemala. When I arrived in Oceanside she was the person who supported me.] Cristina described her friends as people from Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, as well as “*norteamericanos que hablan español*” [North Americans who speak Spanish].

Cristina went on to describe the enormous influence of the Hispanic community in Oceanside: “*Como la totalidad de las personas que vivimos en el centro somos hispanos, es el español que más se escucha en la calle. Yo me siento como si estuviera en Latino America caminando por las calles de Oceanside.*” [Since we’re all Hispanics who live in town, Spanish is what you usually hear in the street. I feel like I could be in Latin America walking down the streets of Oceanside.]

Finally, Cristina commented on her school experiences in her two cultures. According to Cristina, schools in the Dominican Republic are very strict. Cristina described her first school experience saying, “*Era una escuelita de barrio. Había un solo maestro de carácter muy fuerte que tenía el control del grupo.*” [It was a little neighborhood school. There was only one teacher with a very strong personality, and he controlled the group.] Cristina explained that “*en las escuelas de los Estados Unidos, el sistema de enseñanza es muy diferente para mis hijos y para mí.*” [In schools in the United States, the teaching system is very different for my children and me.] She noted specifically that “*allá los estudiantes se sientan separados en el salón de clase y usan uniformes. Aquí los estudiantes trabajan juntos en el salón de clase y las escuelas públicas no usan uniformes, solo algunos colegios.*” [There the students sit separated in the classroom and use uniforms. Here the students work together in the classroom and the public schools don’t use uniforms, only some private schools.] Cristina discussed the fact the large amount of group work in classrooms here at times makes it difficult for her to concentrate and focus.

### **Situational Autobiographies With the Children at Home**

Results of the take-home autobiography lessons revealed the children’s attitudes about being bilingual, the social context of the uses of their two languages, and their adjustment to school in the United States.

While reading the book, *I Hate English* (Levine, 1989), as part of the take-home lesson, Carlos empathized with the main character’s frustration with her second language. In the story, a little girl who has arrived in the United States from China is reluctant to begin using English as her second language. Carlos wrote about his own feelings, saying, “My second language is English. It was hard to learn it.” Cristina recounted a discussion she had with Carlos while doing the lesson which focused on the difficulty he had experienced when they first arrived in the United States and the psychological process he went through while developing English as his second language:

Una de las cosas que más me—me gustó a mí es cuando él dice que él, en—al principio, el primer año, fue duro para él, el inglés. Porque él como nunca había ¿verdad? estado . . . Yo lo admiro a él, porque él como [que actua] como adulto ¿verdad? También que él leyó esto, de la niña [en el libro], y él dice que él le recuerda el primer año que él estuvo aquí ¿verdad? en bilingüe [class]. De esto que el inglés, ¿verdad? era duro para él.

[One of the things—I liked best was when he says that he, in—at the beginning, the first year, English was hard for him. Because he never had, you know, been . . . I admire him because he acts like an adult, you know? Also that he read this, about the girl (in the book), and he says

that he remembers the first year he was here, you know, in bilingual (class). About this that the English, you know, was hard for him.]

Carlos also mentioned in his writing that he now likes English “because it is easy.” He also remarks that he speaks English “in my school sometimes in my house and I know that I have changed speaking English.” “Change” in this case, according to his mother, refers to the progress he has made with English as a second language. Cristina also described her son’s more recent confidence with the English:

[Dice que] poco a poco con la maestra y con los niños, lo que están aprendiendo, y que ahora a él le gusta. Le gusta, que se lo encuentra fácil, porque dice que en inglés las palabras son más cortas. Más cortas, y que en español son más largas.

[(He says that) little by little with the teacher and the kids, what they’re learning, and that now he likes it. He likes it, that he finds it easy, because he says that in English words are shorter. Shorter, and that in Spanish they’re longer.]

Carlos told his mother that he would like to be bilingual and that already he views being bilingual as advantageous. In his autobiography he wrote, “In my life it is fun to be bilingual because it is fun to speak all the languages.” Cristina expanded on this notion during our interview, saying, “*El dice también que a él le gustaría las dos lenguas, las dos lenguas para su futuro. El se va más acá ¿verdad? Para estar bien preparado para el futuro.*” [He also says that he would like both languages for his future. He’s looking ahead, you know? To be well-prepared for the future.] Carlos does, however, view English as a necessity, not simply a fun advantage. He says, “I’ve got to speak it [English] because you’ve got to speak it for your future and I’ve got to learn it.” It is interesting to note that even the situational autobiography project was used as a means of practicing his English. Although Carlos had the option of using either language, he wrote in English to practice his English skills, according to Cristina.

Cristina explained that in spite of Carlos’s desire to maintain both languages, her son’s goal (and her own goal for Carlos) is to move out of his transitional bilingual classroom and into the “regular” education classroom. She commented, “*El me dice que él ahora, porque él está en bilingüe, y que él se está esforzando mucho en la escuela, está tratando de escribir mucho más en inglés y leer más en inglés porque él quiere ir ahora a regular—a la clase regular.*” [He tells me that now, because he’s in bilingual, and that he’s making a big effort in school, he’s trying to write a lot more in English and read more in English because now he wants to go to regular—to the regular classroom.]

Five-year-old Marie showed a bit more naiveté about her bilingual status than did her brother. Cristina began the first lesson on languages by asking Marie, “*¿Cuántas lenguas tienes?*” to which Marie responded, “*una,*” as she

stuck out her tongue. (*Lengua* in Spanish, like the word “tongue” in English, can refer to either a language or the body part.) After Marie reached an understanding of the terms *lengua* and *idioma*, she was able to write (with her mother’s help), “*Yo hablo español y también inglés.*” [I speak Spanish and also English.] Marie was also able to identify the times in her daily life when she uses each language. She said, “*Hablo español en la casa con Papi y Mami, y con Carlos hablo inglés. También en la escuela hablo inglés, y con los americanos.*” [I speak Spanish at home with Dad and Mom, and with Carlos I speak English, and with Americans.] Marie also noted her slight preference for English during the situational autobiography project, saying, “*Me gusta el inglés y un poquito el español.*” [I like English and I like Spanish a little bit.] When Cristina asked Marie why she liked English better, she responded, “*porque el inglés es más bonito*” [because English is prettier].

Cristina’s children, like their mother, commented on the different types of people in Oceanside and the various cultures within the community. Carlos wrote, “In Oceanside there are different people. They are from Central America.” Carlos described himself as having a lot of friends who come from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Central America, noting that “they speak Spanish and English.” Carlos drew a picture of his best friend Eddy (pseudonym), who is from Puerto Rico. Carlos told Cristina that it was Eddy who took care of him at school when he first arrived in the United States. Carlos also told her, however, that sometimes it is he who now cares for other recent arrivals in his class. Cristina recounted a story Carlos told her while doing the situational autobiography:

Me dijo una experiencia que tuvo . . . porque como él sabe inglés y español, y entonces hubo un niño que vino de México, y que fue su primera semana en la escuela. Entonces el niño no sabía como hablar. Entonces Carlos le dijo lo que él quería decir. Entonces Carlos le sirvió de interprete. Y me dijo que se sintió muy bien porque le ayudó al niño.

[He told me about an experience he had . . . because since he knows English and Spanish, and so there was a boy who came from Mexico, and it was his first week in school. So the boy didn’t know how to speak. So Carlos told him what he wanted to say. So Carlos served as an interpreter. And he told me that he felt really good because he helped the boy.]

Marie’s perception of her friends and community is similar to her brother’s. She wrote that people she knows come from “California, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, New York, America, y Salvador.” Marie’s best friend Sara (pseudonym), from Colombia, is also bilingual. Marie, like her brother, also uses her skills with the two languages to interpret at times. Cristina told a story of Marie’s facility with interpreting. She explained, “*Tuvimos una cita. Tuvimos que ir al médico. Ella fue el interprete, con el doctor. Todo era muy bueno. El doctor le preguntó a ella cuanto tiempo está en los Estados Unidos,*

y ella le dijo un año pero todo en inglés.” [We had an appointment. We had to go to the doctor. She was the interpreter, with the doctor. Everything was very good. The doctor asked her how long she’s been in the United States, and she told him one year but all in English.]

Cristina showed great awareness of her children’s rapid progress with the language, and through the situational autobiography project, she came to reflect on the reasons for that progress. Cristina commented on the fact that Carlos and Marie’s friends are nearly all bilingual and that they use both Spanish and English at school. She discussed the fact that it is easier for them to make progress in English because they get a chance to practice every day at school:

Para ellos es más fácil porque están mucho tiempo en la escuela y hablan mucho inglés con los amiguitos. Todos hablan dos lenguas. Es más fácil. En poco tiempo han aprendido mucho inglés ¿verdad? ¡Porque yo tengo problemas! ¡Porque Mamá tiene muchos problemas!

[For them it’s easier because they’re in school a lot and they speak a lot of English with their little friends. They all speak two languages. It’s easier. In a short amount of time they’ve learned a lot of English, you know? Because I have a lot of problems! Mom has lots of problems!]

Finally, Carlos and Marie described their school experiences in two different cultural settings. Like his mother, Carlos experienced the differences in classroom set-up and instructional techniques. Carlos wrote, “Here the kids work together. In my country the kids work apart.” Cristina further explained this in the interview, saying, “*Dice que aquí trabajan juntos, y allí trabajan todos separados. Al principio fue difícil.*” [He says that here they work together, and there they work separated. In the beginning it was hard.] Marie’s perceptions of school in the two cultures were similar to those of her mother and brother. However, she noted one difference in the instructional system in the United States that neither Carlos nor Cristina pointed out in their writing. She wrote that in her classroom here in the United States “*hay tres maestras.*” [There are three teachers.] Cristina noted that the presence of more than one teacher was also a change for her, in addition to the group work and absence of uniforms.

Finally, Cristina commented that the situational autobiography project she engaged in with her children at home had been a positive experience for all involved. Cristina was a parent who for many months had engaged in various literacy activities at home with her children: reading together, writing summaries of stories, discussing television programs, and drawing pictures to illustrate stories. But what made the situational autobiography project different for her was the “*diálogo entre nosotros*” [dialogue between us] that it evoked, encouraging the discussion of issues that might not automatically come up during other shared literacy activities.

## Discussion

This study sought to examine the implementation of a situational autobiography project in a family literacy context from three different angles. In this section we look first at what the teacher-researcher (T-R) learned about the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting an adult bilingual learner. Next, we address what the adult learner learned about the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting her children. Finally, we discuss the effects of both projects on an adult learner's understanding of the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting her as a bilingual.

The situational autobiography project opened the T-R's eyes to the various situational factors in an adult learner's life that were affecting her development as a bilingual. By examining the results of Cristina's situational autobiography and discussing various issues during the course of the project, the T-R learned the potential danger of generalizing or jumping to conclusions about a learner's language abilities without looking carefully at her past experiences. One might assume, for example, that previous study of English implies having learned it. Cristina had studied English previously. Had she learned it? Not really. Cristina acknowledged that she did not learn English, although she was enrolled in English class every day. What was even more significant, albeit more subtle, was the gradual revelation of Cristina's angst about her L2 development. During their discussions the T-R became increasingly aware of Cristina's feeling that she had wasted previous opportunities to learn English and was now struggling to catch up—at a much slower rate than her children. This confirms Grosjean's (1997) claim that it is imperative to examine bilingual learners' past language experiences and daily language use in order to assess their progress or the way in which to approach instruction. The knowledge of Cristina's past experiences helped to inform the T-R about why Cristina seemed reluctant to use English and progressed slowly in spite of her previous study of the language.

Moreover, without the insight into the learners' daily lives that situational autobiography allows, the T-R might have made a quick assumption that because a learner lives in the United States, she is learning English in what is called a *second*, as opposed to *foreign* language setting, since she is, in theory, surrounded by English on a regular basis. Nevertheless, the data produced in this study cautions against making such an assumption. What is clear in this study is that Cristina's contact with her L2 in the community appears to be quite sporadic, and not for extended amounts of time. Therefore, the situational autobiography project informed the T-R that Cristina really does not have much necessity to use the target language frequently and that because of the Hispanic community in which she lives, she is perhaps in more of a foreign language setting. Cristina is not unlike the English-speaking American student who goes abroad to learn another language only to end up conversing mostly with other Americans in English. L2 development in those scenarios may be minimal; when

friendships form across cultures, the necessity and desire to communicate are fostered (Graham & Brown, 1996; Schumann, 1986).

Finally, Cristina and her children noted how an adjustment to a different classroom setup may be difficult. The T-R learned that Cristina, because of past experience in school in another culture, tends to focus and concentrate better when she works alone. Learners do not always come to a classroom with the same ideas about the way class will run or what is the best way to learn, and teachers must adjust accordingly (Heath, 1983; Jordan, Tharp, & Baird-Vogt, 1992).

The T-R adjusted as a result of having learned about Cristina by way of the situational autobiography project. Based on her new knowledge, she was able to inform her instruction and make some changes in her classroom. For example, she began to focus more on some aspects of the language that she falsely assumed Cristina had learned in other classroom contexts. She also tried to provide more opportunities for connection and friendship building with native English speakers, given her limited contact with the L2 culture. Finally, realizing Cristina's anxiety, she became more attentive to her insecurities with the language and more careful in persuading her to practice her English. Finally, she arranged for Cristina to work on her own—away from the large group—from time to time, given her preference for that style of learning.

We now turn to the insights gained by Cristina vis-à-vis her children's experiences. As a result of the situational autobiography project, Cristina learned of the difficulty her son experienced upon their arrival in the United States and was able to discuss his feelings with him. Cristina also learned that her children value being bilingual and see it as an advantage for their future. This is particularly significant because when Carlos moves out of his transitional bilingual education classroom and into mainstream English programs, it will be imperative for Cristina to seek out ways to maintain the development of his Spanish literacy skills, lest they begin to deteriorate over the years, which is often the case. Parents of bilingual children in the United States often do not teach their children to read and write in their native language because they do not feel it is necessary (Brisk, 1998). Thus, when these students eventually move out of bilingual programs, their opportunities to practice reading and writing in their native language decrease significantly. In the case of Marie, it is important to note that following the completion of this study, Cristina recognized the significance of native language maintenance and decided to enroll Marie in Oceanside's two-way bilingual education program, where she will develop literacy skills in both Spanish and English.

Finally, Cristina also came to see that her children get so much practice with English with friends at school that they are progressing rapidly in their development of their L2. Since Cristina recognizes that the development of their L2 is not dependent upon her speaking English with them at home, she is less likely to be tempted to serve as a model for English language skills at home or to cease communicating with them in Spanish for fear of hindering

their progress in English. Such attempts can sometimes prove damaging to parent-child relationships (Rodríguez, 1982).

Turning to a discussion of the effects of the situational autobiography project on Cristina, we see her increased understanding of the linguistic, social, and cultural factors affecting her as a bilingual. In this case, it is particularly useful to think of Wong Fillmore's commentary on immigrant families and language learning in social context:

The immigrant family is in an ideal situation for language learning since it resides in a setting that provides generous exposure to the language in use. The members of the family can hear and learn the language in the workplace, in the classroom, neighborhood, and playground—wherever they come into contact with people who speak the target language well enough to help them learn it. Language learning requires the help and involvement of people who already speak it; their speech behavior allows the learners to figure out how the language works.” (1991, p. 52)

The effect of the project on Cristina was the realization that all members of the family do not have the same exposure to the language in use, nor are they all in the same ideal situation for language learning. Wong Fillmore's assertions are much truer for Cristina's children than they are for Cristina herself. Through discussion of her children's experiences and friendships they have developed with speakers of English at school, Cristina realized that it is normal for her progress to be slower than that of her children, not because of any deficiency on her part, but because their daily experiences and social contacts differ from hers. Cristina has really only established friendships with people who speak her native language, while Carlos and Marie have stronger emotional ties to the target culture. Cristina came to understand that it will simply take more time and a greater effort at using the language for her to attain the same facility with the language.

The situational autobiography project gave Cristina the chance to express and examine some of the challenges she faces in trying to develop English as her second language. Testimony to the impact of the situational autobiography project is the fact that after its implementation, Cristina began to attempt some of her in-class writing in English, which was something she had not done before. Whenever the T-R had suggested this in the past, Cristina laughed and told her she could not do it. Since the program encourages the use of both Spanish and English in responding to readings, the T-R had never forced the issue. But the effort began to come from Cristina herself. She laughed about how little she could write in English compared to Spanish, yet she began to make progress.

## Conclusion

Situational autobiography promotes reflection on the situational factors affecting bilinguals; in a family literacy context it promotes the sharing of those reflections with people who can provide support. Both autobiography and family literacy activities have proven successful in previous investigations, but this study shows that when situational autobiography becomes a shared activity between a parent and a child, the positive effects multiply. Through implementation of a situational autobiography project, teachers may gain an understanding of their learners' past experiences and be able to personalize instruction and strategize about how to ease the difficulties of cultural adjustment. Through the discussion of their own experiences along with those of their children, adult learners may come to understand that some of these experiences, although frustrating, are a normal part of the adjustment process and that outside factors can and do impact their development as bilinguals. And when a situational autobiography project becomes a shared literacy activity, parents and children may be more able to guide each other's bilingual journeys, easing all the bumps along the way with love, comfort, and genuine understanding.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Lesson Plan for Adults

#### “Languages in My Life”

##### Objectives

Learners will explore and understand (a) the *development* and (b) the *daily use* of their L1 and L2.

##### Exploring the Theme in Class/Pre-Writing

###### *Large group brainstorming*

How do you develop your first language? How do people develop second languages? When do you use your native language? When do you use your second language?

###### *Readings*

Introduce poem “At Home”

Learners work in small groups with tutors/teachers to read the poem and answer the following questions. Class discussion follows:

What is the author’s conflict in the poem? Does this poem remind you of language use in your own home? Why or why not? How does the poem make you feel?

##### Discussion of First Draft: Writing Assignment, Chapter 1

Describe the development and use of the two languages you use in your life. Before writing, consider your answers to the following questions:

1. What is your first language? How and where did you develop your first language? How did you learn to speak it?
2. What is your second language? Why did you have to learn it? When and how did you learn it? How long have you been practicing it? How confident are you about using your second language?
3. In your life now, when and where do you use your native language? With whom do you speak it? When and where do you use your second language? With whom do you speak it? Have you noticed changes in your two languages?
4. Can you tell any stories about a moment when it was fun, or difficult, to be bilingual?

##### Teacher Modeling of Writing Assignment

Teacher shares her own response to the first writing assignment.

## Writing Time

Learners take class time to write a first draft about their own experiences.

## Peer Editing of Draft Content

Learners share written draft with another learner who is able to read the language of the text. Learners are ask to point out one to two positive things about the piece and offer one to two recommendations for improvement.

## Rewriting

Learners rewrite the text, using feedback given in peer editing and by the teacher/tutors.

## Revising for Grammar

With the aid of a teacher/tutor, the learner corrects two to three incorrect grammatical problems in the text.

## Publication

Learner types completed text on a computer in the computer lab.

## Appendix B

### Sample Lesson Plan for Children

“Languages in My Life”

*“Las lenguas en mi vida”*

### Take-Home Lesson for Children

*Lección para los niños en casa*

#### Pre-Writing Discussion

##### *Discusión antes de escribir*

Talk with your children about how and why they speak two languages, and when they use the two languages during the day. The following materials may be useful:

*Hable con sus niños sobre como y porque hablan dos lenguas, y cuando usan las dos lenguas durante el día. Pueden usar:*

1. The attached language use charts  
*Las tablas de uso de lenguaje adjuntas*
2. The poem “At Home” that we read in class  
*El poema “At Home” que leímos en clase*
3. The book *I Hate English!*  
*El libro I Hate English!*

#### Using Your Own Writing as a Model

##### *Usando su propia escritura como modelo*

Share what you wrote in class about your own experiences with your child, either reading it aloud or allowing the child to read it.

*Con sus niños, hable de lo que escribió en clase sobre sus propias experiencias. Si quiere, lea lo que escribió a los niños.*

#### The Children Write Chapter 1

##### *Los niños escriben Capítulo 1*

Work with your children to help them write and/or draw about languages in their life, using the ideas you’ve discussed. Try to include information about the following themes:

*Trabaje con los niños para ayudarles a escribir y/o dibujar de las lenguas en su vida, usando ideas que han discutido. Traten de incluir información sobre los temas siguientes:*

1. How and why do they speak two languages, and when and with whom they use the two languages during the day?  
*¿Como y porque hablan dos lenguas, y cuando y con quien usan las dos lenguas durante el día?*
2. How do they feel about the two languages?  
*¿Como se sienten con las dos lenguas?*
3. Are there stories they can remember about moments when it's fun, or difficult, to be bilingual?  
*¿Hay historias que pueden recordar de momentos cuando es divertido, o difícil, ser bilingüe?*

## Revision

### *Revisión*

Read what your child has written. Tell what you really liked, and offer a few suggestions about how to make it even better. Bring the child's text with you to your ILP class, so you can type it on the computer for your child and share it with the class.

*Lea lo que escribió el niño. Digale lo que le gustó a usted, y ayudele a añadir o mejorar algunas cosas si ve que hay cosas que no se pueden entender. Traiga el trabajo del niño, Capítulo 1, a la clase, y podemos escribirlo a máquina si quiere, y compartirlo con la clase.*

