

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BINATIONAL SCHOOL CONTEXT

#### **2.0 Bilingual Education in Mexico**

Bilingual education in Mexico serves two very different purposes and student populations. Romaine (1999) classifies these as “folk” bilingualism and “elite” bilingualism. An example of “folk” bilingualism in Mexico is indigenous children attending bilingual schools where they are taught in their native indigenous language and in Spanish. Smith (2003) describes these indigenous communities as, “their home language is typically not the prestige language of the community and, in most cases, their acquisition of another (generally European) language is a matter of economic and even physical survival. For these young bilinguals, their home language is underdeveloped and frequently ignored completely in school”(p.9). These students come from families with low social economic status and their education may in fact cause subtractive bilingualism. In Mexico these bilingual schools are sometimes private or SEP public schools. The SEP provides these schools with bilingual materials, however, often times it is difficult to find qualified teachers who are speakers of the indigenous languages.

Rippberger (1993) discusses bilingual educational programs that are payed for by the national government for minority language students in Mexico and the United States. When talking about bilingual education policy Rippberger emphasizes that majority group policymakers do not include the minority groups in curriculum planning. The dominant culture continues to control the minority groups often times causing subtractive bilingualism. This is one reason these programs are not meeting students’ cultural and social needs. Rippberger discusses the need to place greater emphasis on ‘Indian identity’. She concludes by recognizing that change is occurring in bilingual

education in Mexico and that indigenous teachers are now considering indigenous culture when planning the classroom curriculum.

Hamel (in press) presents an example of an indigenous school that has begun to adapt their curriculum to meet the cultural, social and cognitive needs of indigenous students. He discusses two strategies that are used when teaching indigenous students. First, he presented the strategy that the Indian people should assimilate to the majority group by leaving behind their language and culture. The second strategy was to preserve the Indian language and culture. Hamel continues by describing San Isidro, a Mexican school that promotes language survival rather than assimilation. This school successfully teaches indigenous students in their L1. The teachers have translated the SEP books and workbooks into the students L1 and have changed the curriculum wherever necessary for including their students' cultural identity.

## **2.1 Elite Bilingualism**

The second type of bilingual education in Mexico is considered to be elite bilingualism. Students learn both Spanish and English in costly private institutions selected by their parents. The majority of this population includes middle-class to upper class families. Private bilingual education in Mexico has become popular and has received a high level of prestige. Although the majority of students in Mexico attend public schools run by the SEP, private bilingual education is increasing in demand. Many parents are willing to pay high tuition rates to receive some type of bilingual English/ Spanish instruction. (Lethaby, 2003) Lethaby (2003) presents various ideas as to the reasons behind the current prestige English-Spanish bilingual education has in Mexico. These include cognitive, cultural and job advantages over monolinguals. Other languages such as Japanese, French and German are also part of elite bilingualism

in Mexico. In Mexico City Japanese/Spanish and French/Spanish elite bilingual programs have been developed. Also in Puebla a trilingual school teaches German/English/Spanish to middle-upper class students.

McGuire (1996) presents the idea of language planning in Central America as command and demand. She refers to publicly taught schools as command. Students are obligated to take English classes that are often times poorly taught by incompetent English speakers. In contrast demand refers to families finding the best-trained private schools and professionals for teaching English to their children. This distinction is similar to Lethaby's work (2003) and the idea of demand in elite bilingualism. She discusses the advantages that parents perceive for elite bilingualism as providing more cognitive advantages, employment opportunities and cultural consciousness (Lethaby 2003, McGuire 1996).

Throughout the city of Puebla advertisements can be seen for small private bilingual schools. These schools range from toddler schools through high school. On occasion the word bilingual on the advertisement may only mean English is offered as a content class and on others English may be offered from 50%-90% of the school day.

The school in this study is an elite English-Spanish bilingual school in Puebla, Mexico. The TBS preschool is different from public schools, as it is not currently affiliated with the SEP. The curriculum at TBS is entirely separate from the SEP program. The only requirement TBS has to the SEP is to follow the same academic calendar. Public schools in Mexico are funded by the government and must follow the SEP curriculum and use the required SEP books and workbooks. The school is also unique in that it is a dual language program. Children are immersed in the target language (English) for half of the day and their native language (Spanish) for half the day. Although this school setting may not be the most common in Mexico, as there are

a greater number of public schools, it is worth studying the literacy practices in order to be able to compare them with other Mexican schools. For example, TBS compared to schools with varying levels of social economic status, public and private, monolingual and rural and urban communities could present a point of comparison for literacy learning and instruction in Mexico.

## **2.2 General Information about The Binational School (TBS)**

TBS did not originate in the same way as many binational schools. The school did not begin with the intentions of reaching the Mexican nationals. It started with a group of six North American parents who wanted their children to continue learning in their native language, English. Mary Jones converted her garage into a bilingual school for the six students. The following year by request from a great many Mexican parents in the community, the school was opened up to any students who wished to attend. TBS was founded in 1942 with the desire to provide wealthy students with a bilingual education. By the year 1977 TBS had developed four different schools around the city. Although TBS is considered a binational school, which draws upon U.S. culture, the structure of the school remains that of the Mexican school system and follows the SEP's academic calendar. Preschool consists of three grade levels where approximately 450 students are currently enrolled. The Elementary school, which begins with first grade and continues through sixth grade, has 1000 students. There is also a High school and a bilingual secretary school that reaches approximately 520 students. TBS prides itself on being known as one of the most prestigious and academically successful private schools in Puebla.

TBS has been a member of the Association of American Schools in Mexico (ASOMEX) since 1998. This association provides support for all the participating

schools, directors and teachers through the sharing of ideas, programs, and facilities. There are currently nineteen schools enrolled with a total student enrollment of approximately 15,500 students. This organization seeks to strengthen the American schools in Mexico through better teacher preparation especially in regards to the multicultural and bilingual aspects of these schools (Association of American Schools in Mexico, 2003).

During the year of this study TBS began the process of applying for its certification as an internationally accredited school through the International Baccalaureate Organisation's transdisciplinary curriculum called, Primary Years Programme (PYP). The purpose of this certification was first, to receive more prestige as an accredited international and bilingual school, as well as, working towards the goal of teaching the students to become independent learners and thinkers through investigation. In order to fulfill the requirements teachers and administrators attended a three-day intensive workshop on the changes that needed to be made in the curriculum. This included intensive investigations that teachers and students would be responsible for throughout the year. One change in the curriculum was the introduction to each thematic unit using the K-W-L (What I know, what I want to know and what I have learned). Students working together with the teacher brainstormed ideas for the questions, "What I already know" and "What I want to know". They then created a chart with the students' responses. The teacher's goal then is to answer the students' questions throughout the unit. At the end of each unit teachers and students will return to the K-W-L chart and add the responses to "What I learned?". Figure 2.1 shows the K-W-L chart used in the participating English classroom.

Figure 2.1 Wall chart using K-W-L technique



The tuition runs from approximately 35,000 to 50,000 pesos (approximately \$3,500 to \$5,000 US) yearly depending on the grade level. TBS also charges an additional 10,000-peso (\$1,000 US) registration fee at the initiation of each year. The majority of students come from middle-upper class families. Many of the parents are business people, university professors and directors, doctors, and other professionals. Students of teachers at TBS are the only students to receive scholarships. Teachers must pay only the registration fee of approximately 10,000 pesos at the start of each academic school year, and the school then waives the monthly fee. Many of the families at the school have been attending for generations. Just as a great many of the teachers are alumni of TBS, many of the parents at the preschool also were students at TBS for a great part of their schooling. Currently approximately 30% of the preschool teachers and administrators are alumnus and approximately 20% of the parents are alumnus (S. Bretón, April 18, 2003).

During the current study TBS celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. Since TBS opened it has been an English/Spanish bilingual school. According to their mission statement the schools objective is “To offer our students the best intellectual, emotional, social and physical development within a multicultural and bilingual framework, in Spanish and English, with the constant practice of universal rights and values”. After the preschool principal of fifty years retired, many changes in the goals and objectives

of the school's curriculum as a bilingual school occurred. For example, the year following the director's retirement the first year of the preschool went from receiving half the day in Spanish and half the day in English to 90% of the school day in English and only 10% in Spanish. The objective was to provide these young students with a stronger foundation in oral and aural English before they were expected to read and write in both languages. This change in the curriculum also had a goal of sparking the children's interest in learning English and creating an enthusiasm for the second language in their first year of school.

### **2.3 Preschool Context**

Private preschool attendance is popular in Mexico. In fact many children attend *maternal* (toddler) schools. These are schools designed for children between the ages of two and four. There are a wide variety of types of *maternal* and preschool in Mexico. They can range from public to private, monolingual to trilingual, and low tuition to high tuition rates. Tuition rates can range from a low registration fee of \$1,100 (\$110 USD) and monthly payments of \$800 pesos (\$80 USD) to a registration fee of \$5,000 pesos (\$500 USD) and a monthly fee of \$2,000 pesos (\$200 USD). At TBS approximately 95% of the preschool students attended a "Maternal". In order to attend TBS children must turn four before January of the school year.

Although this bilingual model is unique to Mexico, it is similar to what Genesee (1999) calls foreign/second language immersion. More than 90% of the students at TBS are native speakers of the majority language, Spanish and are learning English as their second language. The foreign language immersion model ranges from 50%-100% of instruction in the target language. At TBS the first year of preschool has a 90% English and 10% Spanish model. The second and third years of preschool follow a

50/50 model. Students are expected to learn to read and write in both languages and have content classes in the target language.

The preschool curriculum has been developed over the years by the principals and English/Spanish coordinators. The current principals have taken more of an interest in teacher input regarding the curriculum in the past two years. This has included brainstorming and planning with all the current teachers and administrators during professional development days that take place once a month. These changes are also due to the implementation of the Primary Years Programme that requires principals and teachers to have weekly two hour planning sessions together.

The preschool objectives are summed up in the Preschool mission statement:

Our main objective is for the child to successfully begin the socialization process as an individual and as a part of a group where his/her individuality will be accepted and respected. At the same time, the child will be developing academically, physically and emotionally while immersed in a bilingual language program that focuses on two important aspects: on literacy in order to develop a life –long love of reading and on activities that children naturally enjoy such as games, singing.

Since the start of the Preschool in 1977 each classroom had one teacher who taught both English and Spanish. Students remained in the same classroom and received half of the day's instruction in English and half in Spanish. However, five years ago TBS changed their curriculum and provided each class with two teachers and two classrooms. One teacher taught English only and the other Spanish only. This follows Genesee's (1999) idea that different teachers should provide Spanish and English instruction within the foreign language immersion model. This separation of languages allows the students to see their teachers as monolinguals in the language they are instructing (Genesee, 1999). The reason for this change was due to the increase in non-native Spanish speaking teachers in the preschool. These teachers were not able to teach half the day in Spanish. Therefore, the principals felt that it would be more

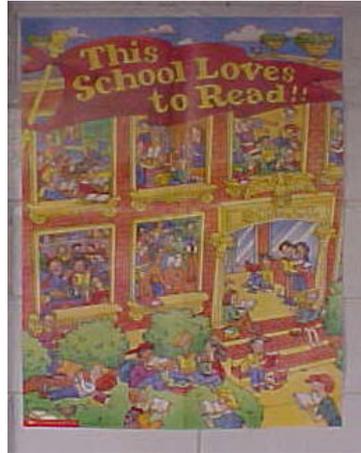
effective to have different teachers for each language. It also allowed students to identify each language with the corresponding teacher and native English-speaking teachers to use their L1 with a greater number of students, as well as, not have to use their L2 as a means of instruction.

The preschool consists of three levels, Kinder, Pre-First and First English. Kinder is the students first year of preschool. The majority of students enrolled in Kinder attended a “*maternal*” or toddler school for one or two years before entering TBS. The previous TBS Preschool principal owns one of the “*maternal*” schools where many of TBS students previously attended, but the others are not related to the school in any way. TBS, however, has a future goal of adding a “*maternal*” to the existing preschool. They have developed these plans due to competition from other bilingual schools that already offer this service. Many families are sending their children to these other bilingual schools since they begin up to two years earlier than TBS and they decide to leave their children in these schools for the duration of their schooling. The administration feels that if they add a toddler school they will not lose as many students to other bilingual schools in the area. At these schools students are presented with a minimal amount of English such as the introduction of numbers from one to ten and simple vocabulary, such as, colors and animals. The name Kinder in Mexico refers to the schooling students receive before Elementary school and most schools consist of first kinder, second kinder and third kinder. At TBS the names have been changed to express the bilingual aspect of the preschool. Pre-First refers to the idea that students are receiving pre-literacy skills in English and that this level precedes First English. First English, therefore, refers to the students first year of formal literacy instruction in English.

## 2.4 Literacy at TBS

Posters such as in Figure 2.2 can be seen throughout the school during the school year.

Figure 2.2 Poster promoting reading at TBS



The school sends home scholastic book orders periodically throughout the school year as well. Children and their parents have the opportunity to buy books with varying degrees of difficulty in English or Spanish. Also, one week out of the school year there is a book fair where students and parents can purchase many types of books in English or Spanish. During the school year it is common to find students walking the halls while reading a book. In a parent interview Clara expressed her opinion about the importance of being a bilingual reader, *“En el futuro hablar, leer y escribir en inglés va a ser un requisito para trabajar y quiero ofrecer a mis niños esta oportunidad desde ahora”*.

## 2.5 First English Context

First English reaches students from the approximate ages of 5.8 and 6.7 years old. At TBS there are six First English classrooms. There is one classroom teacher for every group of 28 students. Three teachers teach in English while the other three in

Spanish. Students receive the first half of the day with their Spanish teacher and then the second half of the school day in a separate classroom with their English teacher or vice versa. The students' two classrooms are always physically located next to each other. English teachers are supposed to maintain the target language throughout the class period; however, I have observed on a variety of occasions the English teacher using Spanish to clarify instructions or correct misbehavior. Students receive the majority of instruction from one of these two teachers, however, some special classes are offered. For instance, physical education, music, art workshop, library and computer workshop are worked in to the weekly schedule and are taught in both English and Spanish. Approximately 80% of the special classes are taught in Spanish and 20% in English. The percentages can vary depending on the month's theme and the class activity.

The curriculum in First English has been developed around 10 central themes. One theme is taught each month. During the year of this study four in-depth investigations were carried out in the classroom. The investigations the year of this study were the plant life cycle, the farm, animal habitats and means of transportation. These investigations were implemented to meet the requirements of the Primary Years Programme (PYP) in order to receive recognition as an accredited international school. Each investigation was performed simultaneously in the English and Spanish classrooms with the intent that the Spanish classroom would reinforce the English curriculum and clear up any doubts from the students.

Students are formally evaluated twice a semester. Both English and Spanish teachers use evaluation rubrics to classify the students' learning according to different academic and social skills. Interestingly, the rubrics for English and Spanish evaluate different skills. Each skill is evaluated according to a scale of very good, good, average,

and below average. Table 2.1 shows the criteria that are used in the English and Spanish classrooms. The full Spanish rubric can be found in Appendix A and the English rubric in Appendix B.

Table 2.1  
First English Evaluation Criteria for Spanish and English Classroom

-Lectura- Ritmo, conocimiento de la letra	-Listening comprehension
-Escritura- Ubicación de la letra en el espacio Letra	-Speaking ability
-Dictado	-Attitude towards language
-Comprehension	-Pre-literacy skills
-Copiado- Omite, invierte, sustituye	

According to these rubrics, students are not required or even asked to have the same literacy skills in both languages. In fact, the literacy standards in English are much less demanding than in Spanish. In English children are not evaluated on their ability to write or even read a text. In contrast these skills seem to be key aspects of the evaluation in the Spanish classroom. Table 2.2 provides an example of the different literacy requirements in English and Spanish.

Literacy evaluation in English includes only the students' ability to read brief sentences on a wall chart and recognize letters and sounds in English. In contrast, students in Spanish should be able to read, comprehend and summarize texts. They also must be able to begin to read fluently out loud.

Table 2.2  
Comparison of the Evaluation Rubric for Literacy skills in English and Spanish

<b>CRITERIOS</b>	<b>MUY BIEN</b>	<b>BIEN</b>	<b>REGULAR</b>	<b>ABAJO PROMEDIO</b>
<b>LECTURA</b> Ritmo Conocimiento de la letra	A. Reconoce las letras enseñadas al leer. B. Une las letras para leer las palabras en una sola emisión de voz.	A. Reconoce la mayoría de las letras enseñadas al leer. B. Algunas veces lee las palabras en una sola emisión de voz y otras en sílabas	A. Algunas veces reconoce las letras enseñadas al leer. B. Une las letras para leer en sílabas.	A. Tiene dificultad para reconocer la mayoría de las letras enseñadas al leer. B. Lee las palabras deletreando

COMPRENSION	Puede leer un texto sencillo y explicarlo con sus propias palabras.	Al leer un texto sencillo puede contestar preguntas de comprensión.	Al releer un texto sencillo puede contestar algunas preguntas de comprensión.	Al releer un texto sencillo no puede contestar preguntas de comprensión.
Pre-Literacy Skills	The child is able to consistently: a. complete sentences on the classroom wallchart and b. recognize learned letters and their sounds	The child is able to: a. complete simple sentences on the wallchart and b. recognize most learned letters and sounds	The child is able to: a. make simple sentences on the wallchart with help b. and recognize some taught letters.	The child has difficulty a. making simple sentences on the wallchart, even with help. b. He/She may not recognize many of the taught letters and sounds.

According to the criteria in the Spanish class, students are also expected to be able to write in Spanish with few to no errors in class during *dictado*, *copiado*, and in their homework. This is not a written requirement in the English classroom and is certainly not evaluated by the classroom teacher.

The English rubric focuses mainly on oral and listening proficiency. Students are evaluated on their ability to complete instructions in English, use learned vocabulary and the degree in which they participate in class. The different literacy expectations are due to the idea that students' L1 literacy should be a developed skill before they begin to learn to read and write in their L2. The Preschool director commented, "In the preschool students learn to read and write in their first language and during the latter part of the year in First English they begin to read and write in English." (S. Keen, September 12, 2003)

As an ongoing assessment tool teachers also keep student portfolios over the course of the year. Examples of students' work focusing on various skills are labeled and placed in the portfolio to demonstrate student advancement and any concerns the teachers have in regards to their academic achievement.

During the last month of classes each academic year students are evaluated in the form of an oral and written testing in English. These tests are used as a reference

point for teachers the following year and as evidence for students who will possibly fail the current academic year. The English rubric is evidence that oral proficiency in English more frequently dictates a student's success in the classroom than a student's literate proficiency in English. Students will repeat the year if their oral proficiency in English remains low throughout the course of the school year. Student portfolios are also passed on to each student's teacher for the following year.

The following section provides brief background information about the two participating teachers. I discuss their schooling and their teaching experience at TBS.

## **2.6 Participating Teachers**

Pseudonyms have been chosen for all participants in this study. María and Laura are the selected names for the two participating teachers. María is a 55-year-old Mexican woman who was born in Puebla, Mexico. Maria began learning English during Elementary school in a monolingual private school. English was offered as a content class. Once María reached High school she began taking intensive English classes at a local English academy in Puebla. She continued her education at the *Universidad Femenil* where she received her degree in Early Childhood Education. Upon completion of her schooling, María began working as an English/Spanish kindergarten teacher at TBS, where she has worked for the past 25 years. She continued her study of English through free classes for teachers offered by TBS. She has been to an English-speaking country on only one occasion as a tourist. María has experience working in all three levels of the preschool, but has spent more years in First English than the other grade levels. María was the only teacher to continue teaching in both English and Spanish after the preschool decided to separate the English and Spanish

classroom teachers. The year of this study was her first teaching experience exclusively in English.

Laura is 42 years old and is an alumnus of TBS. She was a student from elementary school through middle school. Directly following middle school she attended the commerce school, which prepared her to be a bilingual secretary. Upon her completion of the commerce program she was hired by TBS to work in the administration department. From there she was transferred to the preschool, where she became the school's secretary. During her time as secretary she was provided with the opportunity to do classroom observations and substitute teach on occasion. Laura enjoyed teaching and asked to be given a teaching position in the preschool. The following year she left her secretary job and became a First English classroom teacher. She has never received any formal instruction as an educator. She has been working at TBS for 24 years teaching English and Spanish. During this time she has taken part in many professional development workshops, but she has never received a teaching degree. She has experience teaching in all three levels of the preschool. The year of this study she changed levels from Pre-First (second year of preschool) to First English.

## **2.7 Selected Classrooms**

Both participating classrooms consist of one teacher and 28 students. In each Classroom the students are seated at individual desks that are touching each other to form groups of five or six children. Figure 2.3 shows one of the six clusters of tables.

Figure 2.3 The English Classroom Seating Arrangement



In the English classroom all desks are arranged facing the white board, either straight on or from a side angle. At the front of the room next to the white board are the song and poem charts that are used for the daily routine. On the other side of the white board is the teacher's desk where the majority of workbook corrections take place. One corner of the room is walled off by furniture allowing for a quiet reading corner. Some 15 books in English can be found on the shelves in the corner. At the back of the classroom there are a variety of wall charts. Currently there is a grammar chart, a reading chart and the weekly and monthly calendar (which is used for the daily routine) on the wall. On all sides of the room the walls are covered in posters related to the months theme and alphabet letters or other tools that may aid students in completing their work. The classroom is physically arranged to promote guided and independent literacy opportunities. At the front of the room the English teacher has a mural of students' work on her closet door. It seems to portray the best work of each of her students. Outside next to the entrance of the classroom there is a bulletin board that is used for displaying the work that the class is completing in regards to the monthly theme.

The Spanish classroom is arranged with all the desks facing forward towards the head of the class. Figure 2.4 shows the seating arrangement in the Spanish classroom.

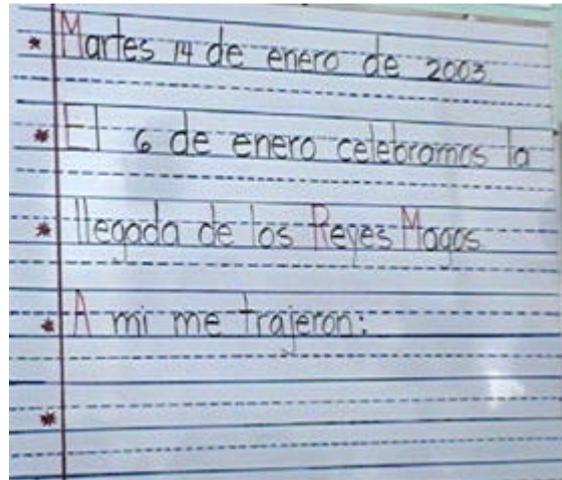
Figure 2.4 The Spanish Classroom Seating Arrangement



The most central spot in the class is the white board, which portrays a permanent lined grid painted on the white board and alphabet letters posted directly above the white board. To the right of the white board is the teacher's desk again where almost all written work is corrected. To the left of the white board is a wall chart that is used occasionally. At the back of the classroom is an easel that holds on average three big books related to the thematic unit. There is also a clothesline that displays various theme related picture posters. In this classroom there is no reading corner and no bookshelves. The majority of time the students spend working or listening at their individual desks. In this classroom environment students are not surrounded by the same amount of written text. Apart from the teacher's big books students do not have contact with books in Spanish. Also the posters on the walls consist mainly of pictures and photographs. Written texts are scarce in the Spanish classroom. The only constant texts are those created by the teacher on the white board grid. An example of this text can be seen in the photo in Figure 2.5.

The unequal amounts of materials in English and Spanish at TBS are an example of Amrein's & Peña (2000) idea of asymmetry in dual language programs.

Figure 2.5 Text by Spanish Teacher on the Lined Whiteboard



Bilingual programs have the intention of providing equal access to both languages involved. However, often in some areas asymmetry occurs which does not provide all students with an equal opportunity to learn (Peña & Amrein, 2000). At TBS “resource asymmetry” was present in the classrooms. The Spanish classroom had less written materials in Spanish. Throughout the English classroom there were great number of posters, wall charts, song charts, titles, and textbooks in English. The Spanish classroom had no reading books in Spanish and the only text type posters were the alphabet flash cards on the wall above the whiteboard.

Figure 2.6 Alphabet Flashcards on the Wall in the Spanish Classroom



This physical contrast in classrooms leads to the assumption that the school may be investing more in materials for the English classroom. The target language appears to be the dominant language in regards to classroom materials and resources. This asymmetry tends to reveal that students had more literacy learning opportunities in the

English classroom. Also, this imbalance in resources may be due to the level of prestige and importance that is placed on learning English at TBS.

As defined by Romaine (1999) bilingual education in Mexico consists of “folk” and “elite” bilingualism. In this chapter I have contextualized TBS as an elite bilingual school. McGuire’s (1996) idea of demand is present at TBS. Families are willing to pay higher tuition rates for English instruction because they believe that their children will have advantages over monolinguals if they are able to communicate in English. Parents believe these advantages will provide their children with more opportunities in the classroom as well as after formal schooling. The context of TBS as an elite bilingual school in Mexico is important to understand because the results of TBS’s literacy practices in this study may only be relevant to this particular site or similar contexts. The description of the school environment is also important for understanding the student and teacher population, the goals TBS has developed over the years as a bilingual and bicultural school, and their approach to literacy.

The following chapter will present the methodology of the study and will give a more detailed description of the participating students and teachers.