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Teaching ideas for biliteracy: Leveraging students' languages and lives

ABSTRACT: Addressing refugee/immigrant education from an asset stance, this formative design qualitative study shares teaching ideas for biliteracy successfully employed by Polish teachers of Ukrainian students in 2023. Based on research from the fields of language and literacy, the authors share the key elements of a biliteracy approach through the acronym HEART, signifying that biliteracy is teaching from the heart: 1) Home language invitation; 2) Engaging multiple language domains; 3) Authentic content; 4) Reinforcement through sentence stems, and 5) Teacher-created mentor texts. Then, they share practical teaching ideas that draw from students' languages and lives that all teachers can use to curate their own curriculum and implement a biliteracy curriculum for their refugee and immigrant students.

KEYWORDS: Biliteracy, Second Language Acquisition, Refugee, Immigrant, Literacy

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Jak cytować:	Stewart, M.A., Muszyńska, B., (2023). Teaching ideas for biliteracy: Leveraging students' languages and lives. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 36(2), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2023.2.4
How to cite:	Stewart, M.A., Muszyńska, B., (2023). Teaching ideas for biliteracy: Leveraging students' languages and lives. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 36(2), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2023.2.4

INTRODUCTION

February 2022 brought a crisis in Eastern Europe and chaos in Polish schools as approximately 800,000 Ukrainian children arrived in Poland instantly, and 200,000 were immediately accepted to schools. As of September 2022, some of the schools in the country were ready to open preparatory (newcomer) classes for refugee learners. The goal of those classes is to prepare students to be able to move to mainstream classes in one year. Schools found themselves in a new reality with hardly any means to provide support to so many students.

Yet, these students brought their rich languaging practices (primarily in Russian and Ukrainian, in addition to some exposure to other languages such as English), their cultural heritage, and their lived experiences into their Polish classrooms. Their teachers, as well as all teachers of immigrant and refugee students, can use students' languages and lives to curate a unique curriculum and instructional approach to foster biliteracy. Thus, taking an asset stance for both students and teachers, we began working with three Polish preparatory teachers in 2022 to develop teaching practices to support biliteracy for newcomer students. Thus, in this article, we share practical ideas based on the theoretical construct of biliteracy for teaching immigrant and refugee students—people who are in the dynamic process of acquiring an additional language and are, therefore, by default, bi or multilingual who already possess varying language skills in one or more other language (García et al., 2008). Further, we also share the key components of teaching for biliteracy, drawing from the acronym HEART, signifying that biliteracy is truly a teaching approach from the heart.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH IN THE FIELD

This study draws from two intertwined bodies of work from the fields of language and literacy (Stewart & Genova, 2020). To represent our approach, we use the term biliteracy, the bi to denote the multiple languages at play for the language learner students, and the literacy to denote the way we communicate using various modes in different contexts. Hornberger (2007) explains the concept of biliteracy as a con-

tinuum where one's proficiency or comfort in one language might vary greatly in different contexts such as modes of communication (written versus oral language), contexts (formal versus familial) or depending on the status each of the languages might receive in various situations. In the U.S., many researchers (e.g., Arreguín et al., 2023; Butvilofsky et al., 2021; Escamilla et al., 2014) have applied the term biliteracy to denote the language proficiency of young children acquiring both English and Spanish simultaneously, often children from immigrant backgrounds. Escamilla and colleagues (2014) denote a difference in bilingualism (speaking two or more languages) and biliteracy (reading and writing in two or more languages). Similarly, research conducted by Nott-Bower (2020), Rabiej (2017), and Pawlicka et al. (2018) in the context of Polish bilingual children living abroad refers to biliteracy as the ability to read and write in two (or more) languages. However, Gort (2019) defines biliteracy as reading, writing, listening, and speaking in two or more languages. We adopt this definition to account for the young children who might not have had the opportunity for formal schooling in their home language due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, followed by the war in Ukraine in 2022. Therefore, we consider a child in our study, such as 6-year-old Val, who had not yet had formal instruction in writing in Russian, his home language, a bilingual child in the process of developing biliteracy. Val is acquiring Polish (both oral language and writing/reading abilities) as a second language. Yet we also want to support Val to develop his home language (Russian) literacy, knowing that L1 (first language) literacy is a building block for academic success as well as L2 (second language) acquisition.

THE MULTILINGUAL TURN IN SLA: BI

We acknowledge that immigrant and refugee learners (regardless of their age) have a pressing need to acquire the language of the new country, highlighting the focus on second language acquisition (SLA; Duff, 2019). Nevertheless, we ground our work in the Multilingual Turn (May, 2014), understanding that one's home language plays an intricate role in second language acquisition (SLA). If we ignore the learner's home language/s in the SLA process, then we are denying them their most valuable resources to learn. Much research illustrates the benefits of taking a pedagogical approach that utilizes a student's home language in SLA through reading in the home language (Flint et al., 2019), clarifying content in the L1 (CUNY-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals, 2021), and writing in the L1 (Salmerón, 2022).

LIVED EXPERIENCES: LITERACY

In our biliteracy approach, we understand literacy as the way to know others and be known to others. Thus, literacy is part of our human connection and what gives us a sense of belonging. We adopt a sociocultural view of literacy, founded on Street's (1995) ideological model of literacy, where one may possess various literacies to make meaning with others through different means. We use the term lived experiences

(Linares, 2021) to denote one's unique experiences in life that are meaningful and personal to them, coming from the heart. Therefore, the activities we employed in the study privileged what the students already intimately knew, themselves and their experiences. They were able to share their interests, their family, their histories, their hopes, and their dreams for the future to the extent they felt comfortable in the safe space that the teachers had created. This increases SLA because the new content is removed, giving the students the ability to focus more on language since they already are the masters of the content and their lives (Stewart & Genova, 2020). Their life stories prompt thinking about how to use L2 to effectively communicate ideas in culturally appropriate ways (Muszyńska, 2024).

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

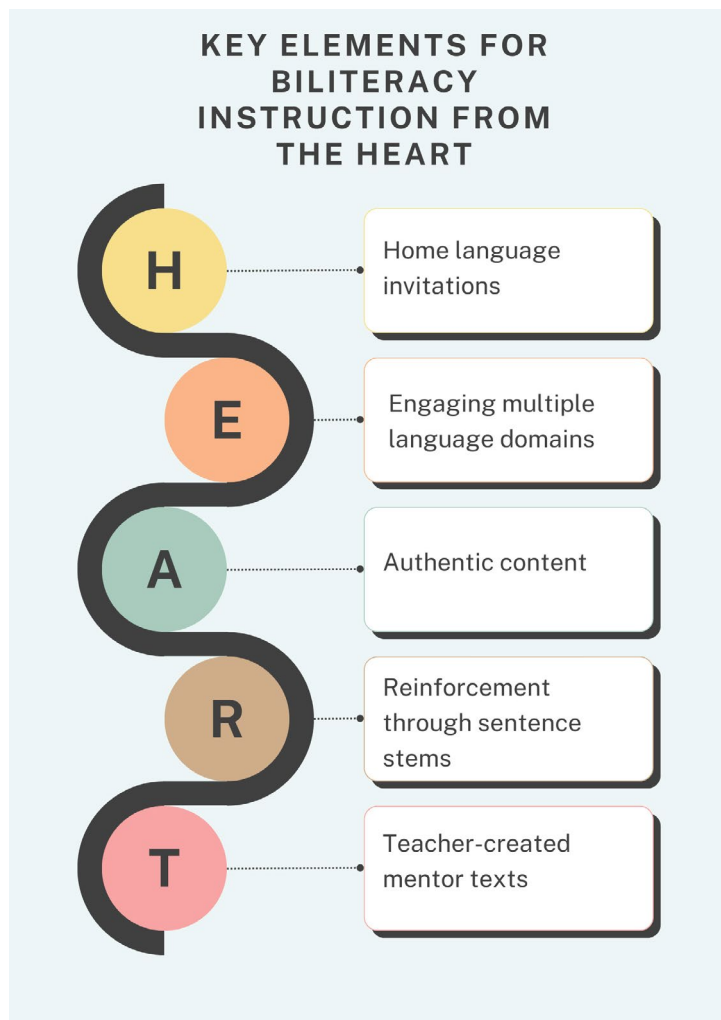
In light of the influx of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, we sought to develop teaching ideas for biliteracy in three preparatory classes for refugee learners in one public school in Poland through a formative design (Bradley & Reinking, 2011). Thus, we collaborated with the teachers to determine new practices of teaching newcomer students that the teachers deemed successful. We delivered six professional development (PD) sessions from January to June 2023 about biliteracy, discussing theory and giving examples from Author 1's ongoing research in the U.S. In each PD session, we gave the teachers two to four options of activities to try with their students and various modifications based on their contexts and students' needs. Throughout the process, we collected data via focus groups, observations, and artifacts (the students' and teachers' work). This data informed the next PD session in order to modify our approach as needed to achieve the best result of biliteracy teaching. Through all of this, Author 2 ensured that teaching ideas were culturally relevant and appropriate for the Polish educational context. Below, we share the key components of the biliteracy approach and the teaching ideas that the teachers implemented that were the most successful.

KEY FINDINGS

BILITERACY: TEACHING FROM THE HEART

There are some key components to these activities, as illustrated in Figure 1. Since we believe that a biliteracy approach is truly heart work, each element is represented by the heart acronym.

Figure 1. Key Elements for Biliteracy Instruction from the HEART



Home language invitations. Naturally, teachers of immigrant and refugee youth will teach the L2 for SLA to occur, yet home language (or languages in the case that the student was exposed to both Russian and Ukrainian at home) invitations are crucial to biliteracy teaching. The teachers in this study provided invitations for the home language use in various ways depending on their knowledge of the students' L1, the role of the teacher assistant, the age of the students, and the content of the lesson. For example, Ms. B encouraged her students to speak in their home language with each other about the learning activity even though she did not speak Russian or

Ukrainian. Ms. L greatly involved her assistant who spoke both Russian and Ukrainian and was from Ukraine herself. In one of our visits to the school, we observed the assistant, Ms. O, explaining the instructions for a Polish letter game to the children in Ukrainian to ensure they understood and could complete the activity that would help them develop alphabet skills in the L2. Ms. L also explicitly encouraged biliteracy by providing books in students' L1s and opportunities for them to write in the L1. Ms. N, who taught the older children, spoke fluent Russian and could help her students better comprehend the content of a Polish lesson by using Russian at times. Thus, she embraced the idea of translanguaging, fluidly moving between languages, to promote student learning. The multiple ways teachers provided home language invitations illustrate that there is no one correct way to teach for biliteracy, but rather various ways to take up the approach depending on the teaching context. All teachers, regardless of the languages they do or do not speak, can purposefully provide opportunities for students to clarify content and discuss learning in their L1 as well as produce examples of their learning in the L1 through writing and speaking, which can further involve families (Noguerón-Liu, 2020). However, we understand that not all teachers will immediately be comfortable with students using class time to read, write, or give a presentation in the L1. Consequently, there are various entry points to home language invitations that can occur through different language modes, in classroom lessons, and through at-home learning extensions.

Engaging Multiple Language Domains. Language domains can be understood through receptive modes (reading and listening) and productive modes (writing and speaking). Most language learners will feel more comfortable with receptive modes at the beginning stages of SLA. In fact, students may show little language production (writing and speaking) but actually be making much progress in the receptive modes of listening and reading, developing comprehension in the L2. For optimal SLA to occur, each learning activity needs to include some form of reading, writing/creating, listening, and speaking. The integration of these language domains promotes SLA, giving students various ways to use their new vocabulary and language structures (Kress, 2000). In addition to engaging all language domains in the L2, teachers can also be purposeful in considering all language domains of the L1 to further promote biliteracy and meaning-making. For younger students, a biliteracy activity might entail less reading, but still, teachers should at least direct students to the board to see and hear them read a few keywords. Older students might engage in more text from the L2 as well as the L1 through translation, where they use critical thinking to understand the structures of the L2 (Puzio et al., 2017). Writing/creating is an example of an output for the students in the L2 where they need to draw or write in response to their learning. Listening will occur as they listen to the teacher provide content instruction, yet students should also be engaged in listening to one another through purposeful listening activities. Finally, speaking is often one of the last components of SLA to develop, especially if students are in the silent period (Krashen, 1985). Yet, skillful and caring teaching can help students engage in speaking in the L1 and through proper support (see sentence stems below), as well as some L2 speaking,

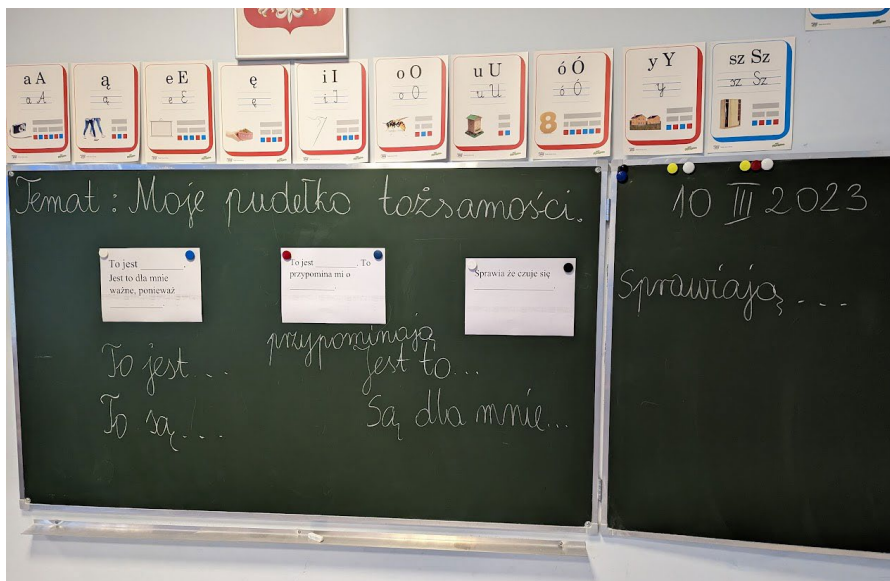
to formulate one's ideas and gain confidence in the content. The teachers in our study were the most successful when they expanded a teaching idea to include all language domains. For example, after Ms. N read her mentor text of a heart map (see below) to the class, the students created their own heart maps, wrote a paragraph about them, and practiced listening and speaking as they shared their maps with others. Engaging multiple language domains promotes deep L2 learning, which is reinforced when students are also encouraged to use the L1 to make meaning with others.

Authentic Content. Classroom learning is often devoid of what really matters to students. In particular, immigrant and refugee students might feel that their language, culture, and lived experiences do not matter to their teacher if the content of the curriculum does not seem authentic to them. This can lead to disengagement from learning. However, research illustrates that curricular content that embraces the students' lives (Herrera, 2022) and cultures (Paris & Alim, 2017) leads to greater academic success. This is especially important in the context of SLA, where we want students to acquire the L2 effectively and efficiently so they will be successful in their new country. Our study and other research (Stewart & Genova, 2020) show that immigrant and refugee students are often eager to share their individual uniqueness with their teachers as well as others in their class. This can include elements of their cultural heritage, memories from their home country, and even emotional anecdotes where they can express their sorrow and joy. Thus, these personal aspects and lived experiences can become the content of the classroom and the foundation for SLA. Sharing from one's heart can even be cathartic and healing for students who have experienced trauma, left behind loved ones, or are finding it difficult to adjust. Activities that leverage not only their language but also their lives authentically engage students in the content of the curriculum. They are doing activities and engaging in learning that matters to them because nothing is more authentic than themselves. Although the teachers in our study were initially hesitant about making the learning personal, they saw students begin speaking in class for the first time and engaging in learning the L2.

Reinforcement through Sentence Stems. Sentence stems, also referred to as sentence frames and sentence starters, are supports, or scaffolding, for language output. They provide the beginning, or sometimes middle and end, of a complete, grammatically correct sentence with one or more blanks for students to fill in with their own ideas. This includes speaking and writing to help students use the vocabulary they are learning and acquire language structures (Stewart & Genova, 2020). Sentence stems are particularly important in the L2 to give the students confidence to use the language. Ortega (2009) explains that one key ingredient of a language classroom is pushed output, which is the idea that language learners need to be encouraged to produce the language they are learning through speaking and writing (Swain, 2000). However, the push needs to be gentle and with much support for students to develop confidence and a positive attitude regarding the L2. Sentence stems reinforce sentence structure, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary in authentic ways that allow students to share their own ideas. As students use these sentence stems for writing and speaking while also reading and hearing them as the teachers model their use,

various elements of the L2 are reinforced in a natural way. This adds to the students' confidence in the L2. Figure 1 illustrates Ms. N's sentence stems to help students write and speak about themselves to others in the class using Polish, the L2. Many language teachers find sentence stems useful for everyday output in class; however, sentence stems can even form the foundation for more extensive speaking or writing activities that the teacher will model through their mentor text described below.

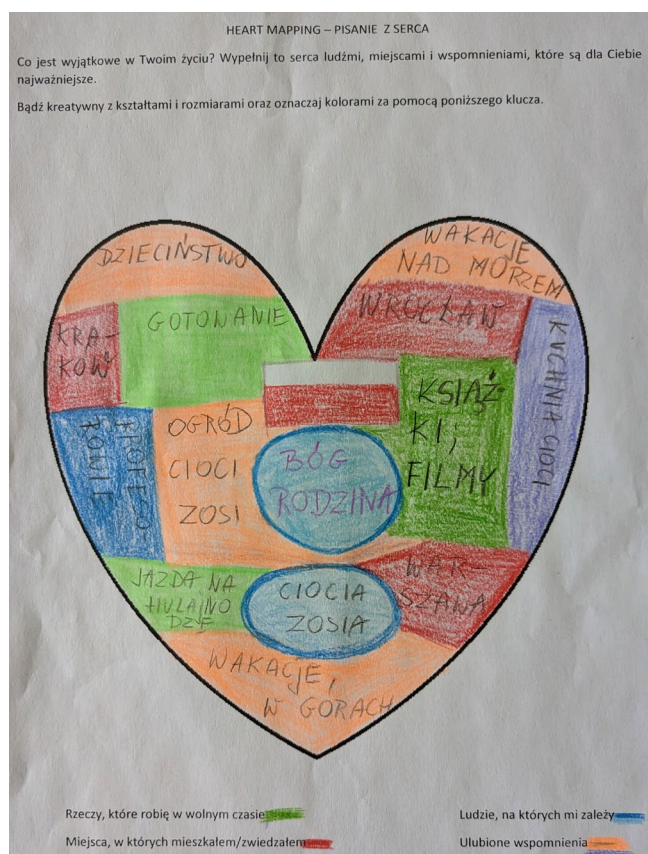
Figure 2. Sentence Stem Classroom Example



Teacher-Created Mentor Texts. A mentor text is an example, even an exemplar, of what the learner is working toward in a final project that can include multiple and any language domain. This might be an oral presentation, artwork, essay, poem, or dramatic interpretation. A mentor text does not have to be only reading and writing but can be any form of output where a student demonstrates their learning of the L2 and the content. Teachers often use published writing or other forms of art as examples to inspire and shape student writing (Culham, 2014). Yet *teacher-created* mentor texts are authored by the classroom teachers themselves, laying a foundation for authentic connection, community, and relationships in the classroom. In our research, we have observed and experienced that students want to know their teachers more personally. When students see their teachers as human beings who experience many of the same emotions as them, this can lower their affective filters (Krashen, 1985) and pave the way for greater SLA. Therefore, in our biliteracy approach, teachers provide the exemplar and concrete example for students. This allows for an emotional connection while also showing students what they are working toward

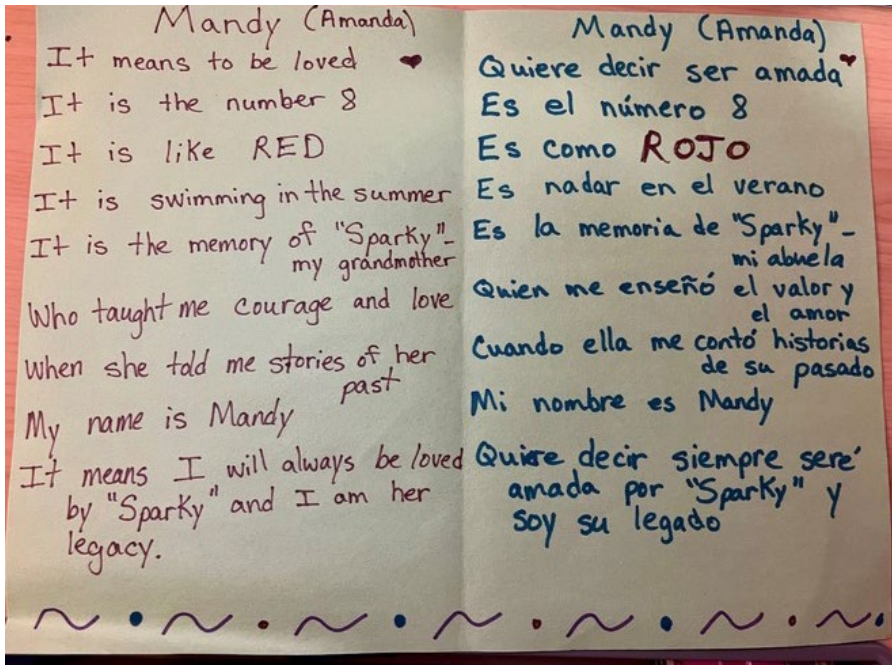
in their biliteracy projects. For each activity in our biliteracy approach, the teacher needs to first create a mentor text themselves to model for the students. This includes sharing items in one's identity box through oral language, writing a poem, or creating a heart map (described below). As teachers share their mentor texts when they introduce the activity, this also increases students' listening and reading in the L2 as they learn more about their teachers' lived experiences through the mentor text. Figure 3 shows Ms. N's mentor text for heart maps. Figure 4. Shows Author 1's mentor text for a bilingual name poem. Indeed, teachers opened up their classroom spaces for students' lifeworlds¹ by first sharing their stories with the learners. This vital step of allowing students to "see a teacher as a real person," as Ms. N. commented after her lesson, seems crucial in using biliteracy for building a sense of belonging, healing, and identity formation and as a means to develop students' L2.

Figure 3. Ms. N's Heart Map



1 experiences of life and interactions with others (in more than one language) and the environment that form an identity for each and every one of us

Figure 4. Author 1's Bilingual Name Poem in English and Spanish with Name Removed



IMPLICATIONS: TEACHING ACTIVITIES

In each PD session, we gave the teachers multiple activities that author 1 had used in research with immigrant and refugee youth in the U.S. that author 2 thought might translate well into the Polish classroom based on her multiple experiences as a language teacher and teacher educator. The three activities we describe below (identity boxes, heart maps, and biographical poetry) are the ones the teachers chose to implement and reported that they were the most successful in their classrooms for engaging students, content learning, and L2 acquisition. Notably, the teachers in our study made each of these activities their own, implementing them in various ways based on their teaching context. Nevertheless, each of these activities shared the key elements above to various degrees (HEART): home language invitations, engaging multiple language domains, authentic content, reinforcement through sentence stems, and teacher-created mentor texts.

Identity Boxes. The first activity that the teachers of the younger students chose to implement was the identity box (Stewart et al., 2023), which focuses on oral language but can also include reading and writing. Developed by Author 1's graduate student, identity boxes provide a way for students and families to share themselves with the teacher and the class, ideal for the beginning of the school year. First, the

teacher creates their own mentor text by placing items that represent them in a box (such as a shoebox, but a bag can also be used) and then decorates the box to also represent them by drawing pictures, cutting out images and pasting them on the box, and/or writing. Then, the teacher orally shares their box with the students, modeling what students will be encouraged to do. The box, the items in the box, and the presentation all represent the teacher-created mentor text. Figure 5 is an example of the contents of Ms. B's identity box.

Figure 5. Contents from Ms. B's Identity Box.



Sometimes, learners do not grasp the point of a task after receiving instructions from the teacher, yet here, they get to make sense of the task before they hear the instructions. Then, they listen to the instructions more attentively if they are interested in how to do the task. The motivation to act comes from the content, the teacher's story, not the instructions. Once the teacher shares the mentor text, they send home instructions for the families to complete this activity with their children, engaging in home language literacy. Families can include anything that represents who the student is, a picture of family members, an object that represents a good memory, or a favorite toy. Each child can share the items in their box at school with the

class. Many students in this study chose to bring items that represented their country, Ukraine, such as a flag, currency, or items of the colors yellow and blue. Students brought items that allowed them to share their lives with their teacher and classmates. Figure 6 shows one of Ms. L's students who chose to share his passion for drawing and building trains through his identity box. He presented the whole notebook full of pictures of trains and one train that he built with no instructions, based on his own drawing.

Figure 6. Student Sharing Items from His Identity Box Representing His Love of Trains



Teachers provide students with sentence stems in the L2 to help them with speaking as they give their presentations. The sentence stems can be modified based on the L2 proficiency of the students. Teachers can also extend the activity to writing and have students choose three items to write about as guided by the sentence stems in the L2. Examples are:

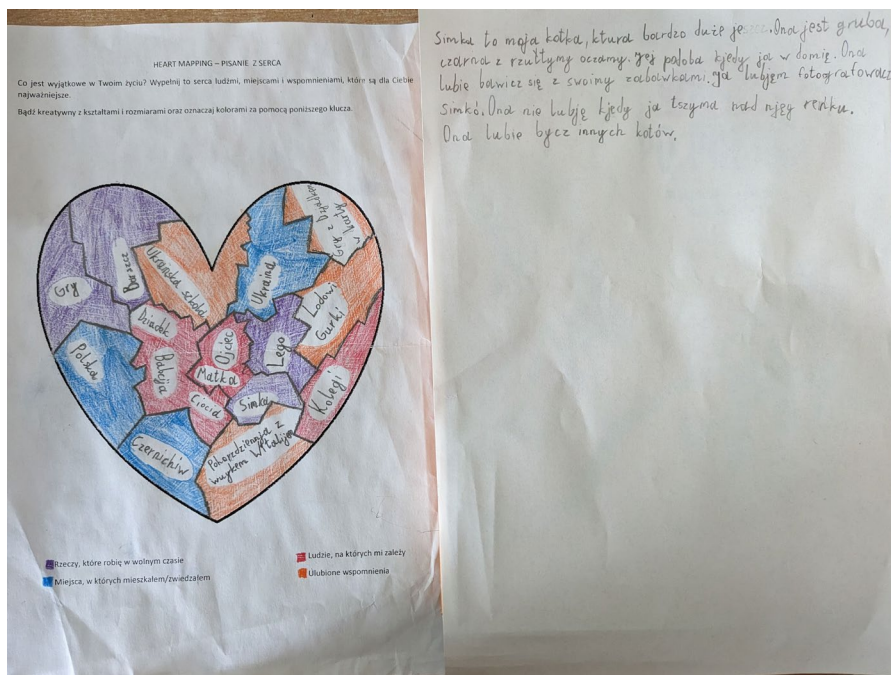
- » This is a _____. I like it because _____.
- » I brought a _____ because _____.
- » This is a picture of my _____. She/he/ is important to me because _____.
- » I like _____ so I brought _____.

Students may feel more comfortable first brainstorming ideas in their L1s (with family or classmates) and then moving on to working in the L2. They might also choose to share primarily in the L1 and use the L2, as guided by the sentence stems, when comfortable. Additionally, some students might share their identity boxes in both languages, practicing authentic biliteracy for different audiences. Thus, this activity is perfect for differentiated instruction as it will support all types of learners of various L2 proficiency while also involving families and creating a classroom community.

Heart Maps. This activity was originally developed by Heard (1999) and put into practice with language learners by Author 1 and colleagues (2020). Students receive a paper with a heart shape on it and instructions to write and draw what is in their heart with prompts such as people I love, places I've been, dreams I have, etc. After the teacher shares their heart map and gives instructions, the students begin filling in theirs, color coding the different categories through a legend at the bottom. Blue might represent people, red places, and yellow activities. They can also add categories to the ones on the template, choosing what they want to share about themselves. This can be a multimodal activity as students use both words (in the L1 and L2) and drawings or symbols. Some students may also want to take their time and complete the heart maps at home while also discussing their maps in the L1 with family members. Once the maps are complete, they become a starting point for writing and oral language throughout the school year. Students can practice speaking in L1 and L2 about a selected component of their heart map with a partner as guided by sentence stems. They can also begin writing sentences about items on their map using the sentence stems. Their life stories become prompts from L2 production. This meaningful content helps learners make sense of how to communicate ideas in L2 and provides motivation for speaking and writing. This is especially useful in a classroom environment where teachers explicitly assure students that translanguaging is a norm and that they should continue expressing their ideas even when they cannot think of the right word in L2.

After Ms. N shared her heart map with her students in Polish, she was amazed at how students responded, saying that they seemed to see her differently after that moment. Figure 7 shows one of her student's heart maps and the paragraph she wrote about her cat, an item on the map, in the L2. Additionally, students can create bilingual heart maps. Some might write some words in the L1 to represent their home country, experiences there, and memories from there, and then use the L2 to represent memories or important people they associate with their new country. This could uniquely allow them to express their bilingual identity and serve as a reminder that even if they have had to leave their home country, they also carry it with them while they make new memories and meet new people in the new country. Heart maps can be used throughout a school year as a prompt for speaking or writing. Students can see their progress in language learning, as they are able to express more ideas in the L2 every month.

Figure 7. Student's Heart Map and Paragraph about Her Cat



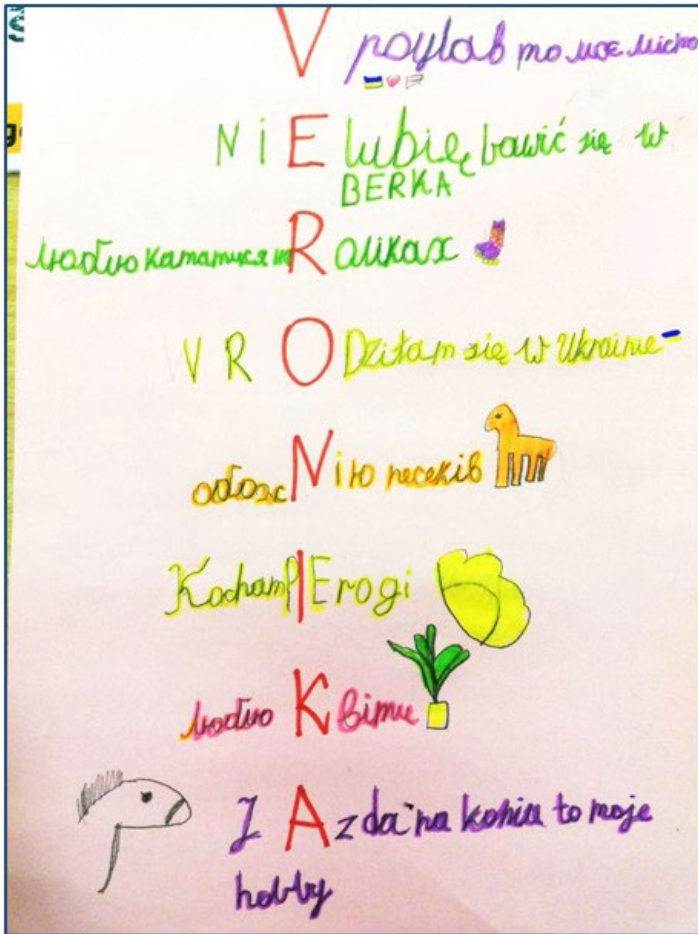
Biographical Poetry. Our names are meaningful, and our lives are important to us. They are what we know best, giving us more cognitive room to focus on SLA since we are already the experts of the content. Poetry is also a useful vehicle for SLA, particularly when learners have a specific structure or template similar to a series of sentence stems. Biographical poetry brings these two ideas together through various poetry templates (all found on www.ReadWriteThink.org) such as a BioPoem, Where I'm From Poem, Name Poem, or an acrostic poem of one's name, country, or item important to them (Stewart & Genova, 2020). Teachers introduce one poetry template at a time, first showing their mentor text and even including a bilingual version if they can write in two or more languages. Then, they provide students with the mentor text and help them understand the template, such as the prompts in the name poem (NCTE/IRA, 2004), which includes the following:

- » Line 1: Your first name
- » Line 2: It means (adjective), (adjective), and (adjective).
- » Line 3: It is like (describe a color, but do not name the color).

Based on the students' language proficiency and age, teachers can modify the name poem or other templates to create their own version for their mentor text and then their students' poems. Further, students can also have the freedom, their poetic

license, to add any lines they think are important in their poem, making this activity appropriate for multi-level classrooms. In addition to using the templates to write their poems in the L2, students can also write them in the L1, receiving help from parents or other classmates as needed, to further biliteracy development and family partnerships. To extend the project, students can create multiple forms of biographical poetry and create a poster that showcases their multiple poems in all their languages accompanied by artwork of their choice. Teachers may also combine all students' poems in a class book to give to every student to keep at the end of the school year. This way, the students feel like published authors and have a memory from their class. Figure 8 shows one of Ms. L's student's acrostic poems about her name that showcases her country, Ukraine, as well as her interests and bilingual writing.

Figure 8. Student's Acrostic Poem



CONCLUSION

As Thomson (2002) said “each [learner] brings...to school a virtual schoolbag full of things they have learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live” (p. 1). This life-world knowledge can be immediately used in the language classroom for immigrant and refugee students who are in the dynamic stages of second language acquisition and adjusting to a new culture. However, students will only want to share their lives in a safe classroom environment when teachers also share their lifeworld while inviting students’ L1s into the learning environment and providing multiple support for SLA. Our study suggests that we might best approach language education for immigrant and refugee students through a biliteracy approach that draws from the HEART: home language invitations, engaging multiple language domains, authentic content, reinforcement through sentence stems, and teacher-created mentor texts. Content knowledge and language instruction grounded in students’ cultures, histories, environments, and local communities stimulates learner engagement and language use. Further, these teaching ideas for biliteracy purposefully leverage students’ languages (the home language/s and the L2) through multiple domains in addition to their lives while providing SLA support. Identity boxes, heart maps, and biographical poetry represent teaching ideas where all teachers can nurture students’ biliteracy, partner with families, and create a classroom community.

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POMYSŁY DYDAKTYCZNE W DWUJĘZCZNOŚCI: WYKORZYSTANIE JĘZYKOWEGO I ŻYCIOWEGO POTENCJAŁU UCZNIÓW

ABSTRAKT: Zajmując się edukacją uchodźców/imigrantów z perspektywy praktycznej, to formatywne badanie jakościowe prezentuje pomysły na nauczanie umiejętności biliteracyjnych stosowanych w 2023 roku z powodzeniem przez polskich nauczycieli ukraińskich uczniów. Opierając się na badaniach z obszarów nauki języka oraz umiejętności czytania i pisanie, autorki dzielą się kluczowymi elementami podejścia do dwujęzyczności za pomocą akronimu HEART, podkreślając, że dwujęzyczność to edukacja płynąca z serca tj.: 1) Zaproszenie do nauki języka ojczystego; 2) Z zaangażowanie wielu obszarów językowych; 3) Autentyczne treści; 4) Wzmocnienie poprzez sztyk zdania i 5) Teksty mentorskie stworzone przez nauczyciela. Autorki dzie-

lą się praktycznymi pomysłami na nauczanie, w którym wykorzystywane są języki i przeżycia uczniów. Pomysły te mogą być wykorzystane przez wszystkich nauczycieli do stworzenia własnego programu nauczania oraz wdrożenia programu nauczania umiejętności czytania i pisania dla swoich uczniów-uchodźców i imigrantów.

Słowa kluczowe: dwujęzyczność, akwizycja drugiego języka, uchodźca, imigrant, umiejętność czytania i pisania

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: dwujęzyczność, akwizycja drugiego języka, uchodźca, imigrant, umiejętność czytania i pisania