

# ask an expert...

## Teaching Reading

I would love to get some "expert advice" on teaching my son Pedro to read English. In his Spanish preschool (he's 4) they are beginning to learn the vowels, recognizing the written letter and also the sound. The first one up is "u" so we've been pointing out words with the "u"-sound and letter "u" when we see them. That's easy in Spanish, because every time you see a "u", you know it's going to have the same sound. But of course in English it doesn't. First of all, if he sees the word "bus" I have to explain that the "u" in English has a different sound, so we don't say "boooooos." Then, the words that do have the "u"- sound are spelled all sorts of different ways: shoe, two, blue, knew, you... not to mention through!

I do have a book with some pre-literacy activities (mostly phonemic awareness) for monolinguals in English, but I don't know how to go about it without hopelessly confusing him, since he's only just learning it in Spanish, and the letters don't always have the same sounds. At the same time I want to encourage his interest in how sounds and letters match up to make words, and I want to take advantage of the malleability of his young mind. So I would hate to put it all off until he has learned to read in Spanish.

So I thought maybe other people might also be wondering how and when to introduce reading in the minority language. Maybe there is someone who would be willing to address this?

-Kate in Spain



I think you need to start by asking yourself why you want to do this, and what is it that irks you about having Pedro learn to read in one language before another. Is it because English is your language? Is it because you feel that Pedro will think less of English if he can't read in it? My hunch is that Pedro is not a bit worried about (not) learning to spell in English.

I don't think he will need encouragement. He will make it clear himself whether he is interested in sounds and letters. It is likely that he will become curious about spelling in other languages, since he is being introduced to spelling in one. He will naturally assume that all languages can be spelt in some way, but I doubt it that he will also assume that all languages are spelt in the same way. If he knows that Spanish and English 'say' things in different ways, there's no reason why he should think they 'write' things in the same way.

So the 'problem' that you see in the lack of unique correspondence between letter and sound in English is your problem as a literate adult in English, not his as a novice speller.

If he asks you about spellings in English, just answer naturally: 'bus' is spelt b-u-s in English, the letters b-u-s in English spell 'bus'. No frills, no worries, no explanations. This is what I did with my children when they started spelling in school -- two different languages for each child, none of them my shared language with the children -- and they mostly satisfied themselves with factual answers of this kind. If Pedro wants to know more when he learns other letters, like my children sometimes did, you can ask him things like what would b-u-s spell in Spanish? how about s-u-b in Spanish? and how about s-u-b in English? Just for fun, again no pressure and no explanations. I ended up buying one of those simple sets of magnetic coloured letters to have on our fridge, and we had unending fun spelling words and non-words, and leaving silly one-word messages to each other in all languages we knew, whenever we happened to be in the kitchen.

Pedro has no idea that such things as 'phonemic awareness' exist. I, for one, found out about it when I started studying linguistics...

I hope this helps in some way!

Sincerely,  
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**Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is the author of *Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment* (2006) Clevedon, *Multilingual Matters* ([www.multilingual-matters.com](http://www.multilingual-matters.com)). She has received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.**

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