

INTERVIEW

Critical Reflections on Research, Teaching, and Service in Bilingual Education: A Conversation with Ester de Jong

Katherine Barko-Alva ^{a*}, Ester J. de Jong ^b

^a William & Mary

^b University of Colorado Denver

* Contact Info: 301 Monticello Ave., Williamsburg, VA 23185, U.S.A., kbarkoalva@wm.edu

Article Info

Received: September 29, 2025

Accepted: October 23, 2025

Published: June 30, 2026

Abstract

On August 29th, 2025, Dr. Katherine Barko-Alva conducted a virtual interview with Dr. Ester de Jong, internationally renowned professor in the field of ESL and Bilingual Education and the Co-Editor of the Bilingual Research Journal. Dr. Barko-Alva met Dr. de Jong while she was conducting her graduate studies at the University of Florida. Dr. de Jong's ongoing teaching and mentorship have shaped how Dr. Barko-Alva approaches socio-cultural and linguistic issues in ESL/Bilingual Education. This interview was framed within the context of teaching, research, and service in the field. Leadership and mentorship were discussed in depth, providing an insight on how Dr. de Jong's career has evolved throughout the years. The dynamics of teacher education and educational advocacy in the United States were explored in the following section. The last segment examines current trends in research in the field of Dual Language Bilingual Education and explores the science of reading movement.

Keywords

advocacy; dual language bilingual education; leadership; mentorship; teacher education

RESEARCHER'S BACKGROUND: LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP

Katherine: Good afternoon, Dr. de Jong. It is a privilege to have this conversation with you. Would you briefly describe the most impactful events in your journey as an educator, researcher, advocate, and leader?

Ester: Let me start with my experience as a learner. Growing up, I had a stutter. The reason why I was stuttering was that my mind was going way faster than I could pronounce the words I was reading out loud. So, when I read out loud, I would stutter. I remember my third-grade teacher giving me the time to get through what I had to read. I always appreciated his ability to not embarrass me and to communicate the notion of “It is fine if you are different, and we are going to create and hold space for that.”

Another important experience was moving away when I went to university. I moved to the southern part of the Netherlands, and there is a clear distinction in the way that we speak Dutch in the north and the south. Going south made me much more aware of language,

language differences, and standing out because you speak or use language differently. Eventually, I became interested in how we treat languages other than whatever the official language is. For me, an important question that has guided my work ever since is “How do we treat languages in schools, and how do we treat students who speak another language in the Netherlands (in this case, Dutch)?”

A life-altering experience was when I had an opportunity to do an internship at the Massachusetts Department of Education as part of my master’s degree at Tilburg University. I had talked to my professors at the university [in the Netherlands] and I mentioned I would like to go abroad, and that I was interested in bilingual education. My professors had connections in California with adult ESL, and they tried to see if I could do an internship there. Unfortunately, it did not work out, and I had resigned myself to an internship in the Netherlands. Then, I received a phone call in September asking me if I was still interested in going abroad and I said, “Sure!” It turned out that another faculty member had a connection at the Massachusetts Department of Education, in the Education Office of Equity. Charles Glenn was the Director at the time and was willing to host me for my internship. He introduced me to Language-in-Education policy and Two-Way Bilingual Education as promising ways of working with bilingual learners. This experience put me on a path to learn more and to focus my doctoral work on bilingual education at Boston University. I was fortunate to have Maria Estela Brisk as my advisor; she was and still is just an amazing mentor and role model.

After I earned my doctorate degree, I went to work for Framingham Public Schools as the assistant director for bilingual education. The director was Susan McGilvray-Rivet, and she was an impactful and caring leader. She was a real example of what good leadership looks like. I learned so much from her in terms of passion, but also in caring for students, teachers, and families. She was always creative and inclusive in how she did things.

Then, I went to the University of Florida, and over time, took on different leadership roles both within the university and within professional organizations such as TESOL International Association and the American Educational Research Association - Bilingual Education SIG. This was never a matter of consciously planning for these roles but what I have done is saying *yes* when given the opportunity and simply doing my best. Nine out of ten times I would be terrified, “What do you mean, applying to become the president of TESOL International Association?” I have learned that it is okay not to know everything, to trust the team that works with you, and to dare to lean in.

Katherine: I appreciate you bringing us back to the learner component as we begin this interview.

DUAL LANGUAGE BILINGUAL EDUCATION/TWO-WAY BILINGUAL EDUCATION: TEACHER PREPARATION

Katherine: We know we are in dire need of two-way bilingual education teachers, especially in the US. In your opinion, given your trajectory and years in the field, what are some ways we could increase our bilingual teacher pipeline in the United States?

Ester: The first issue is we do not have enough teachers in general. We do not have enough Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) teachers, and we need more teachers across the board. To me, that is partially a matter of having more bilingual students graduate from high school. Unless we graduate more students from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, it will continue to be difficult to broaden participation in the workforce. If our students are not graduating from high school, then we do not even have a pool to recruit from. We need to lift up the profession again and remember how important teachers are in the lives of children. We also need to recognize that being a good teacher requires deep expertise and high-quality preparation.

To enable more individuals to become bilingual teachers, we need more bilingual education programs. In addition, we must diversify our pathways. Here at CU Denver, for example, we have a pathway designed for paraprofessionals, as they have a unique educational, linguistic, and cultural skill set. We have some people with bachelor's degrees from their own country; there are also some who have an associate's degree from the United States. These individuals are interested in becoming teachers, but the traditional model of initial teacher preparation does not work well for them. To support these professionals, it is important to have programs that allow their prior experiences to translate into a license to teach. Many districts feel they must get teachers from other countries for their bilingual programs. To this end, *Grow Your Own* programs create an alternative route by investing in the local community.

In addition to new and innovative pathways, we need to create rich internships within bilingual programs, so they understand what it is like to be a bilingual teacher. As part of our National Professional Development grant, *NextGen Colorado Bilingüe*, we have developed several resources and will be offering bilingual courses to support teacher candidates' knowledge base about dual language education and give them opportunities to further

develop their English and Spanish. This is especially important for our many heritage language speakers, who may feel insecure about their ability to use their heritage language for formal purposes, like teaching content. Finally, we have found that being part of a strong mentor network is important for teacher success, both while teacher candidates are in the program and after they have graduated.

Katherine: This is fascinating, so I have a follow up to that question... This bilingual teacher professional identity, “What are some of those characteristics?”

Ester: We are just beginning our research, but it is grounded in our teacher candidates' own lived experiences growing up bilingually. We encourage our teacher candidates to reflect on their own experiences with language and literacy, as well as on their personal (im)migration stories. These reflections then lead to a better understanding of how we think about language and literacy and bilingualism and why we think that way. We can then explore questions about language use and the implications for their professional identity as a future bilingual teacher. What we want to do as part of our work is to understand that full arc: Teachers' beliefs, understandings, and practices, and student outcomes, broadly defined. We need to understand these beliefs and practices and see whether, when, and how those practices matter for student learning.

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY

Katherine: The teacher candidates with whom I work have a heightened sense of advocacy as they come into our two-way bilingual programs. Whether it is an intergenerational message they are trying to convey or whether they are capturing their language or their culture once again, they go in with a mission and with a vision. If school districts are thinking about implementing *Two-Way Bilingual Education* programs guided by sound theory and praxis, what considerations should they adopt in this political climate?

Ester: They should be aware that they are going to go against the grain and be prepared to explain what they do and why they do it. For example, we know that the emphasis is on English language acquisition, we must point out that these kinds of programs [TWBE/DLBE] have the best results in acquiring English. It is not necessarily faster, but it is better long-term, and with much better outcomes. They need to be prepared to show data and to set up their own program to be able to collect those kinds of data. They need to be able to shift the paradigm that assumes that more English means better English learning. Because of the field we are in, we are always going against the grain. I learned this early on as the Assistant

Director in Framingham. For example, our bilingual students were always the last ones to be considered. I think you are always naturally in an advocacy role due to the nature of our field. And, when you are in bilingual education, it is even more so, because people still have questions around that, because there are so many ideological pieces that come into play in these programs. I have always been the person at the table to say, “So what about the bilingual students? What about the bilingual program? How does this impact the teachers who are working in high school with an ESL curriculum? How do we make things right for everybody, including bilingual learners?”

As a district, the focus needs to be on putting together the best education for all your learners. If you can do a dual language or two-way program, then do a two-way program, and do it well. This means building in a planning year before you start doing anything. Know your community. Know your students. Know what makes sense in your context. A planning year gives you a year to get the buy-in from the people that you need buy-in from. When skipping this planning year, it is easy for a program to fall apart after one or two years, especially when faced with challenges. If a one-way program is a better option, then do a one-way program. If you have many different languages and a bilingual program does not make sense, then have a multilingual stance when you implement the program. The non-negotiable for any student is that we respect and build on our students’ languages, cultures, and experiences.

Katherine: Yes! I remember this is something that I learned from you when we were working together in Florida. Now I have the privilege to speak to different school districts, and that is my first point: One year—if you can manage two, that would be wonderful—but at least a year of planning, because it does make a difference.

Ester: It really does.

RESEARCH TRENDS IN DLBE/TWBE

Katherine: Thank you, Dr. de Jong. Now, we move into research. What are some of the current research trends you see in our field?

Ester: I am the co-editor of the *Bilingual Research Journal*, and this has given me an interesting view of what is being published. What is encouraging is that we are recognizing that bilingual education is not just about two languages and what happens in two languages and that those languages are English and Spanish. We are actively seeking manuscripts that

look at different languages, different contexts, including bilingual education outside the United States. We also see the need to look at dimensions beyond language; that is, intersectionality of issues related to race, social class, gender, and so forth. One other dimension is in research methods: Much recent work is qualitative in nature, so it is fair to say that we need a quantitative component that provides context to the robust qualitative piece. To be clear, it is not either-or. We must ensure that we support the quantitative and the QuantCrit piece as well.

I was also fortunate to be part of the 2024 DLBE Researcher Convocation which led to a research agenda for the field. In this agenda, we identified teacher recruitment and preparation, effective practices, and policy and implementation as three key areas where more research is needed. We also discussed what a multilingual stance means for research design—the questions we ask, what data sources we include, our data analysis, and dissemination efforts. The Multilingual Learning Research Center has the Dual Language Bilingual Education Research report (de Jong et al., 2025).

THE SCIENCE OF READING MOVEMENT

Katherine: Let us shift to a topic which is impacting research and teaching in TWBE/DLBE classrooms. In your position, and knowing what you know from the literature, please tell us how the *Science of Reading* can be implemented in meaningful ways in classrooms designed to meet the needs of multilingual learners. How should we approach research endeavors within this context?

Ester: Several of the initiatives we observe nationally rely significantly on research that has been conducted with English speakers learning how to read in English, and it is robust research. The cognitive branch supports our understanding in terms of what we think occurs in the brain. While it is still a black box, we are in the process of achieving more clarity. From the field of linguistics, we understand how the English language works within the context of phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. In addition, the field of psychology is providing good insights on what seems to happen in terms of cognitive processes. As part of my work with the *National Committee for Effective Literacy* (NCEL), we argue that these are important lenses *and* they need to be augmented with additional, more socio-culturally oriented lenses, if we wish to understand all the complexities of learning how to read, becoming literate, becoming critical thinkers and communicators, and what this means for how we teach reading (National Committee for Effective Literacy, n.d.). If we seek

a broader understanding of the science of reading and multilingual learners, we need to do for multilingual learners what we know from research would work best for them. We need to pull from the literature which examines bilingualism comprehensively; not just monolingualism and/or second language acquisition. And more research is needed in these areas.

As we examine these complexities, we should ask what the research base is that we are using to make recommendations. Are we using research that was designed to see what happens in the case of multilingual learners? While some reports have specifically examined second language acquisition, this literature does not always come into the current policy conversation and multilingual learners are largely absent from the state policies (Howard, 2025). The more narrowly focused conversations around the science of reading have not paid close attention to second language learners. The assumption is the implications for practice would be the same for both bilingual and monolingual learners. As we carefully examine these dynamics, these questions come to mind: “Do we have research that confirms and/or denies these claims? And are we using research conducted specifically within the context of second language acquisition and bilingual development?”

When we think about reading development, we should consider how we create connections to what students know, and teachers should be aware of the cultural experiences and knowledge students bring into the classroom. For example, how teachers approach phonics instruction for multilingual learners should be closely examined. When a newcomer arrives to the classroom, they already speak their own language fluently, but their oral language in English might still be in the beginning stages. If the teacher’s phonics lesson is expecting them to identify sounds or work with sounds they cannot distinguish yet, then additional support might be needed. In this case, the teacher should do phonics instruction; however, the focus should be on the sounds the newcomer can identify. In a recent *El Gazette* article, Dr. Socorro Herrera and I explained that it is not about whether we do phonics or not; instead, we argued that phonics instruction should occur in a way that makes sense for multilingual learners (de Jong & Herrera, 2024). Thus, we should encourage teachers to be agentive and modify phonics instruction to serve the linguistic, academic, socio-cultural, and cognitive needs of multilingual learners. For teachers in a bilingual program, it is pivotal to understand how we may approach initial reading instruction differently for Spanish and English because of differences between the languages, and how biliteracy development occurs.

Katherine: Agency plays a significant role. You mentioned expertise and agency, so when teachers can recognize what the child needs and if they have the knowledge and agency to enact change, then they can transform classroom practices.

SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Katherine: Reflecting on service within the context of TWBE/DLBE: How can institutions of higher learning and school districts collaborate in meaningful ways to foster and promote sustainable practices?

Ester: We can partner with bilingual programs and/or bilingual schools. Our partnerships should support the needs of the school as well as what we might be looking for as researchers, teacher educators, and the opportunities we can create for teacher candidates. There is synergy when those components come together. When research is conducted at the school level, it should not be so extraneous to what the school realities are. Carefully listening to the questions teachers are asking allows us to design meaningful research projects. When we engage in these partnerships, it becomes scholarship of engagement. While conducting professional development, everybody in the school should be involved (e.g., teachers, admin, staff, families, and teacher candidates).

Katherine: The intersectionality of research, teaching, and service, right? And everything just makes sense when you combine all those pieces.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Katherine: Any last thoughts as we engage in research, teaching, and service over the next three years?

Ester: I do not know if you had a chance to see the last AERA's Bilingual Education Research SIG's webinar (see Cardona et al., 2025), Dr. Miguel Cardona was the opening speaker. He said (and I am paraphrasing), "We are here, in the right place, at the right time because this is where we need to be as advocates for bilingual learners." He used the term, "We need to all level up our efforts." We need to level up our advocacy now more than ever. I am still mulling over what this means. This is not the time for us to stop advocating. Given some of the censoring that is happening in terms of the words we are allowed to use, we may need to talk about our work differently, but we cannot stop advocating on behalf of our students. Dr. Deborah Palmer was another speaker on the webinar. She mentioned the beauty of a mosaic which is to pull together things that seem broken and make something new out of

that. The new product has traces of the original. There will be some aspects of our advocacy that may go dormant for a bit, while other pieces may become more visible. However, we will put all the pieces back together again. We must keep doing the work. I hope people find ways to level up and likely that will have to happen locally, within our communities, as well as at the state and federal level. Our communities are where we need to be.

Katherine: Thank you, Dr. de Jong.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to María Pía Oelrich, a Ph.D. Candidate in Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership with a concentration in curriculum and educational leadership at William & Mary School of Education for her ongoing support with transcription.

THE AUTHORS

Katherine Barko-Alva  is an Associate Professor of ESL and Bilingual Education at William and Mary School of Education, and the Co-Director of WMSURE (William & Mary Scholars Undergraduate Research Experience). Her research interests are dual language bilingual education programs, teacher education, teachers' metalinguistic awareness, family engagement, emergent bilinguals, DLBE teachers' Spanish language development. She has more than fourteen years of professional experience teaching as well as designing and implementing job-embedded professional development in the United States. Dr. Barko-Alva was awarded the Virginia Latino Advisory Board Latinx Leadership Award in Education and the Janet Brown Strafer Award (William & Mary School of Education) recognizing her efforts for promoting equitable and inclusive learning spaces in our classrooms and community. In 2021, she received the Jefferson Teaching Award at William & Mary. In 2025, she received the W&M President Award for Service to the Community. She is currently serving as a W&M Reveley Interdisciplinary Faculty Fellow.

Ester J. de Jong  is a Professor of ESL and Bilingual Education and Associate Dean of Research and Academic Affairs at the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. She is currently the co-editor of Bilingual Research Journal and has published extensively on dual language education and general education teacher preparation for English language learners. She has been the Director of the School of Teaching and Learning and Professor in ESOL/Bilingual Education at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida. Dr. de Jong was President of TESOL International

Association (2017-2018). Her K–12 teaching experience includes an emphasis on literacy development, and her research focuses on literacy opportunities with culturally and linguistically diverse students, reading strategies, and domestic and international teacher preparation for diversity in the classroom. Her scholarly work has been published in key journals such as *Bilingual Research Journal*, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *Language Policy*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *Peabody Journal of Education*.

REFERENCES

- Cardona, M. A., Palmer, D., García, O., & Garibay, M. (2025, August 22). *Town hall meeting* [Webinar]. Bilingual Education Research Special Interest Section, American Educational Research Association.
- de Jong, E. J., Castro, M., Hopewell, S., Howard, E., Rodríguez, M., & Rogers, D. (2025). *The dual language bilingual education research agenda* [The Dual Language Researcher Convocation Report]. Dual Language Education New Mexico. <https://mlrc.wisc.edu/dlbe/>
- de Jong, E., & Herrera, S. (2024, March 26). Asking the right question: Teaching reading to bilingual learners. *el gazette*, 488. <https://www.elgazette.com/asking-the-right-question-teaching-reading-to-bilingual-learners/>
- Howard, S. M. (2025). *Legislating literacy instruction: Where are multilingual learners?* [CAL Research Brief]. Center for Applied Linguistics. <https://www.cal.org/publications/legislating-literacy-instruction-where-are-multilingual-learners/>