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## First Book Ups Bilingual Offerings with Barefoot Books

By Shannon Maughan | Nov 11, 2024

Literacy and education nonprofit First Book has added a World Languages category within its First Book Marketplace—the online site where eligible First Book members can obtain books for underserved children at the lowest possible cost, or for free. The category debuted in April and features bilingual book bundles printed in English and 19 different languages, including Arabic, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Korean, and Vietnamese, and also contains the popular and continually growing selection of Spanish and Spanish-English bilingual titles.

The development of the World Languages category came in direct response to the results of a survey conducted by First Book's research division, First Book Research & Insights, in late 2023. Approximately 3,500 First Book members whose students speak languages other than English responded. (More than 400 languages are spoken by students in U.S. public schools.) Among the key findings of its survey, First Book learned that respondents ranked bilingual picture books of higher interest than books published in a single language. To fill the clearly expressed demand for these

materials, First Book relied on one of its longtime partners, Barefoot Books, a company that has been publishing children's bilingual titles—mostly in Spanish and French—for more than 20 years. "Our focus has always been very global," said Nancy Traversy, co-founder and CEO of Barefoot Books. "From the very beginning, we published stories from writers and musicians from all over the world, so we've always had an emphasis on helping to raise children to be open-hearted and open-minded global citizens," she added. Barefoot

stood ready to deliver bilingual books in numerous other languages because it had begun doing similar projects with literacy groups in 2017. That's when they initially worked with a group called Books for Africa to create books for HIV AIDS orphans and vulnerable children in Mozambique, translating 10 books into Mozambique and shipping 300,000 copies there. Barefoot similarly published books translated into Malagasy for vulnerable children in Madagascar. Traversy said that this effort evolved into another project, teaming up with distributor Books for Schools in 2019, for which Barefoot translated 20 books into 20 languages. "We kind of organically got into this space," she said. "Because of our founding mission, so many of our books were [ones] that children could see themselves in. Diversity, inclusion, and representation are in our DNA. It felt like a natural progression to do partnerships in literacy."

When Barefoot began presenting its growing bilingual catalog at ALA and other conferences and events, "We started to realize that there was a huge demand for these books," Traversy recalled. "And it's growing. As people move about the world, for all kinds of reasons, there just seems to be a need for books, because of families being displaced."

Traversy believed that expanding their partnership with First Book could be another important avenue for getting Barefoot's bilingual books into the hands of kids who need them. "When we told First Book that we had these books available, they were thrilled," she noted. "They put together these bundles and it was a major exercise this spring,

where they tried to figure out the size of the bundles and what languages were needed.”

Moving forward, Barefoot wants to be a pioneer in this space of creating books in various languages. To that end, “We’re launching Barefoot Bilinguals in spring of 2025,” Traversy said. “We’ve got six board books and six paperbacks available in eight languages.” The languages spotlighted in the program’s kickoff are based on what Barefoot has seen in its recent initiatives and are also informed by feedback from partners about which languages are in most demand. “In certain areas of the country with certain partners, there’s a real need for books in Indigenous languages,” Traversy said, noting that Navajo will be one of the first offerings in the Barefoot Bilinguals line. And First Book is on board; it will be adding the Navajo titles to the Marketplace in February.

In any language, these efforts and partnerships translate into good news for educators and kids and families in underserved communities.