Building on What We Know: Best Practices for Engaging Emergent Bilinguals in Learning

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to describe best practices for engaging emergent bilingual students in learning. As more educators across the state of Georgia are working with emergent bilingual students, we have identified several strategies and structures that are recognized as being effective for all students and highlight ways to modify those classroom practices to benefit students who are learning English as an additional language. We describe ways to make language visible (anchor charts, word walls, sentence frames, and sentence stems), as well as effective practices for readers' workshop. We also recognize that family engagement is critical to student success and provide strategies to enhance school-family connections among culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families.

Keywords
teaching strategies, emergent bilinguals, readers' workshop, family engagement

Introduction

Throughout this article we use the terms English learner and emergent bilingual interchangeably. While we recognize the term English learner is more commonly in use across the state, we also use the term *emergent bilingual* to recognize the linguistic assets of students who are learning English as an additional language in schools (García, 2009). Both terms are imprecise as *English learner* positions students only as students who are learning English without recognizing the rich language knowledge students bring to the classroom, and *emergent bilingual* indicates students are in the process of learning a second language when English could in fact be a third or fourth language. For us, both terms indicate students of a variety of English proficiency levels who use a language other than English at home. The strategies and structures presented in this article will help students learn English and also build on the linguistic and conceptual knowledge they learned prior to beginning school in the United States.

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), about 10% of all public school students are considered English learners. These approximately five million students reside primarily in urban areas, but numbers in rural areas are on the rise (NCES, 2021). Although more than 75% of English learners across the country speak Spanish, there are more than 40 different languages spoken by students and their families. Georgia mirrors national statistics with about 8% of public school students receiving ESOL program services (Sugarman & Geary, 2018). Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Arabic are the most common languages spoken by students in Georgia with 78% speaking Spanish (Owens, 2020).

The number of English learners has been rapidly increasing over the past decade with a 61% increase between 2011 and 2019 alone (Owens, 2020; Sugarman & Geary, 2018). This creates a challenge for Georgia educators and administrators, as most educators working with English learners and their families have not had adequate education or professional development to be effective with this population (Greenberg et al., 2015). Many districts and teachers are scrambling to incorporate best practices to help their emergent bilingual learners to succeed.

The purpose of this article is to highlight ways to expand on what are widely considered as best practices for *all* students (i.e., anchor charts, sentence starters, word walls, and Reader's Workshop) to bolster the academic success of English learners. Additionally, we augment these classroom practices with best practices for engaging families and communities in the educational process, further promoting positive outcomes for these students.

Background & Context: The Authors

We are three Georgia teacher educators with vastly different experiences working with emergent bilingual students. Our backgrounds span teaching elementary, middle grades, and high school students both in and beyond the traditional classroom setting. We have each taught for over ten years and in multiple content areas. Our collective expertise is enriched by our individual experiences as educators in Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas. In addition to the diverse geographic, demographic, and political contexts of our work, we have taught emergent bilinguals across language development models. For example, we have taught in ESOL, pull-out, push-in, sheltered instruction, bilingual education, dual language, and heritage language programs.

Regardless of context or instructional model, our experiences have shown three strategies to be beneficial for emergent bilingual students: making language visual and visible, using reader's workshop, and connecting with families and communities. When utilized in tandem, these practices facilitate student success and enhance school/family/community connections. While we do provide research and best practice citations throughout, we primarily draw on our experiences working with emergent bilingual students in varied and multiple contexts to discuss these practices. We agree that the guidance below will positively impact the academic achievement of English learners in the classroom, as well as the broader educational context.

Making Language and Concepts Visual and Visible

Emergent bilinguals benefit from learning in an environment that is both language and image rich. Anchor charts, interactive vocabulary walls with pictures, and sentence frames are three strategies that support all students and can be enhanced to further support emergent bilinguals (Gibson, 2016). These are three commonly used techniques that can be leveraged to provide access to content concepts and facilitate academic language development. The sections below provide a

brief overview of each strategy and then offer opportunities for enhancing those strategies for the success of emergent bilingual students.

Anchor Charts

Anchor charts are tools used to support instruction, or "anchor" learning. They are typically created as a class so that both the teacher's and students' thinking about a concept are made visible. While teachers will want to prepare the framework for the anchor chart ahead of time, when students help with the co-construction, that chart is more relevant and meaningful, particularly for emergent bilinguals (Bacchioni & Kurstedt, 2019). In addition to collaboratively constructing anchor charts, there are several ways that they can be more relevant for English learners. Consider using a different color for important vocabulary terms and adding illustrations to make some of the text more comprehensible. The use of color helps emergent bilinguals differentiate between key terms and descriptors, and helps students identify key terms easily. Adding visual support with images, sketches, and examples provides English learners access to content concepts. While the student may not know the word for the concept in English, they might know the concept based on prior experiences. Presenting a visual helps an emergent bilingual make connections between known concepts and the English word for that concept.

We fully realize that many educators at the elementary level take full advantage of anchor charts, and we advocate for their use in middle and high schools as well. While the terms and illustrations may change, the support they offer will not only facilitate the academic success of immigrant students at the secondary level; they will also support those students who struggle with the academic language of school.

Word Walls

Word walls are commonplace in many classrooms. They are typically made up of several individual words written on sentence strips and posted in a given location in the classroom. While having vocabulary words posted and visible to students at all times is certainly better than not having them posted at all, without regularly engaging students with the Word Wall and/or providing other supports to help students access and apply the terms, the impact of a Word Wall is lessened. Here are two ways to augment the impact of Word Walls: 1) adding images and/or examples, and 2) designing classroom activities that require students to access the Word Wall or allow them to access the Word Wall for support (Jackson et al., 2017).

When images or examples are added to Word Walls, they provide the context needed for emergent bilinguals to access content concepts. Often examples are provided orally during direct instruction and class discussions, and emergent bilinguals miss out on the benefit of the example because they do not know the English words for the illustration. Consider words used in describing the water cycle (e.g., *evaporation*, *condensation*, *precipitation*, and *sublimation*). Adding a visual to represent each process will facilitate comprehension and provide clues to support use of the word wall in class activities and discussions.

Even if Word Walls feature images alongside key terms, if students are not guided in the use of Word Walls as learning tools, the existence of a Word Wall will have a limited, if any, impact on student learning and language development. It is important for teachers to design activities that require students to use words from the Word Wall. These activities do not need to be long or complex. For example, a prompt for an exit ticket could state, "Use four words from our Word Wall to describe two ideas from today's lesson." Or, after a Think-Pair-Share activity, partners could be required to include words from the Word Wall in their response or explanation.

Regularly integrating Word Wall activities, makes the Word Wall interactive, provides additional practice in the use of content terms, and reminds students that the Word Wall is there as a resource for them.

Incorporating Sentence Stems and Sentence Frames

Sentence frames and sentence starters help emergent bilingual students develop a deeper understanding of the syntax and discourse structure of academic English (Donnelly & Roe, 2010). It also supports their use of terms regularly used to express concepts and ideas such as *similar to*, *different from*, *leads to*, and *results in*. As students begin to incorporate these phrasal verbs into their writing, they will also begin to recognize them as they engage with classroom texts. These terms often signal text structure, and a student's recognition of a text's structure leads to improved comprehension. Further, using sentence frames to support English learners during writing or discussion activities helps support both their quality of writing and quality of thought (Lee, 2018).

Sentence frames can also be used to support students' understanding of content concepts. For example, building off of the terms for the water cycle above, a series of sentence frames could include: Precipitation is *similar to* condensation because they *both* _____. Precipitation is *different from* condensation because precipitation _____, *whereas* condensation _____. These sentence frames facilitate higher order thinking that will help move students beyond defining and identifying. They also enable emergent bilinguals to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts while lightening the linguistic load. Further, as students engage with increasingly complex texts, it is important to provide students scaffolded opportunities to comprehend and produce academic texts.

Using Readers' Workshops

It is imperative to provide emergent bilingual students with opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak to develop both their language skills and content knowledge. Many strategies help emergent bilinguals to acquire English while advancing their reading comprehension and writing skills. Among these strategies, we believe the most effective are modified readers' workshop approaches that incorporate interactive read alouds and guided reading.

Interactive Read Alouds and Guided Reading

Although the components of the reader's workshop model are beneficial for all students (Atwell, 2014), they are particularly helpful for emergent bilinguals. These instructional strategies include teachers modeling their thinking and developing purposeful questions, students verbalizing their thoughts through open discussions and looking for evidence to support their ideas and understanding, and small group instruction to individualize the students' learning. These elements assist emergent bilinguals to advance their English language proficiency while developing their reading comprehension skills.

Interactive Read Alouds

Reader's workshop emphasizes the importance of teaching a reading skill or a literary concept as part of the process. One of the best ways to do it is through interactive read alouds using mentor texts that model the skill or concept. When choosing a mentor text, we recommend looking for a book that fits the specific instructional purpose while being culturally relevant and engaging (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is important because students are more motivated when they relate to a story based on their own experiences and home culture. We also recommend asking students

about their preferences and interests to match these with the academic concepts to be taught. This way, learning can be more meaningful and relevant for emergent bilinguals, and thus, their language skills and concept knowledge can continue developing.

Further, before you start to read, make sure you are prepared with an initial set of open-ended questions regarding the targeted skill or literary concept; these questions will generate relevant interconnected questions from the students' perspectives. The teacher's modeling of open-ended questions will enable students to learn how to formulate relevant questions, which in turn will assist them to become independent learners. While reading aloud, we recommend clearly enunciating statements, paraphrasing as necessary teachers' questions and responses to the students' questions, and using gestures and images to contextualize words.

Once the interactive read-aloud mini-lesson of 7 to 15 minutes is finished, students will be provided with a space where they can practice the skill or analyze the concept, preferably in pairs. During this time, the teacher will provide a couple of guiding questions, and students will discuss their understanding of the skill or concept with their partners, look for evidence to support their ideas in their chosen books, and write in their reading journals.

Guided Reading

One of the strengths of this structure is that it allows for teachers to work with small groups of students while the rest of the class works in pairs or independently. During guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012, 2016) it is essential to implement a short (15 to 20 minute), well-structured lesson that targets a skill or concept. The small group format provides students with a safe and unthreatening way to practice vocabulary words, orally discuss the chosen leveled book, and develop their critical thinking skills. Intentional formation of small groups is essential for the success of guided reading. Teachers can organize students into groups based on their reading level, need to work on a specific skill, or their English proficiency level. Using leveled texts allows the teacher to work with small groups of students at a level that promotes learning and supports student success.

After finishing the guided reading groups, move back to whole class instruction and open a discussion by asking students to share their findings regarding the guiding questions and target skill or concept. This final activity will offer students opportunities to learn from each other and to advance their oral language skills. Taken together, this process will provide emergent bilinguals with several opportunities to learn a skill or concept, practice their vocabulary, and advance their discursive and oral language skills. Thus, it is important to plan for well-structured lessons with purposeful strategies to help emergent bilinguals advance their English language skills and concept knowledge.

Connecting with Families and Communities

While specialized instruction is crucial for academic success for emergent bilingual students, it is not always enough. As educators, we know what research shows: students and schools benefit from parental/family involvement (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Student from culturally and linguistically minoritized backgrounds (e.g., students of color, emergent bilinguals, and those from immigrant families), as well as students living in poverty, historically have lower rates of traditional parental involvement than students from middle-class, English-speaking, majority backgrounds (Andrews, 2013; Marschall et al., 2012; Palomin, 2020; Zarate, 2007). Knowing that, it can be difficult to determine how best to get parents and families involved in school activities and academics. First, it is important to determine what positive family engagement should look

like in your specific teaching context. Next, potential barriers to that ideal engagement need to be identified. Finally, we need to find appropriate ways to overcome these barriers to maximize accessibility for families to engage with school. Here, we present some real-life examples of ways we have successfully fostered family-school engagement.

Positive Family Engagement

Positive family engagement can vary widely, depending on numerous sociocultural factors. We use the term *family engagement* because it more accurately reflects the range of family participation in school-related activities than *parental involvement*, which ignores the diverse composition of families and connotes a limited view of participation (i.e., participation in in-school activities). Teachers need to make sure they are familiar with their students' backgrounds so that they have appropriate expectations for family engagement. For example, many Latino families view the family's role as a supportive one and leave the teaching to the school. This is not a sign of disengagement or disinterest, but a sign of respect; because the teacher knows what the student's academic needs are, the family's responsibility is to support the child through providing advice, encouragement, and care. Meaningful engagement may be in the form of regular contact with teachers, participation in extracurricular activities, or even sending the student to school with a good lunch. We must recognize that our students' families may view engagement differently, and we should adjust our expectations accordingly.

Identify Potential Barriers to Engagement

It is important to identify potential barriers to engagement. For example, if your school has a large percentage of working families, it may not be feasible to expect parents to volunteer in the classroom during the day. Other common obstacles to engagement with schools and activities include language barriers, communication difficulties, childcare needs, transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, cultural unfamiliarity, and not feeling welcome. Understanding the individual family situations of your students will allow you to design school engagement opportunities with accessibility in mind.

Maximize Accessibility

Maximize accessibility for family-school engagement opportunities. On average, families with lower income and less formal education tend to have lower rates of school involvement than those with higher-incomes and more formal schooling. Research (and experience), however, has demonstrated that schools that successfully carry out family partnership programs increase involvement of families with lower incomes and less formal education (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Goldsmith, & Kurpius, 2018). Additionally, teachers' family engagement practices are equally or even more important than family background factors when determining family engagement with school (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). This means that with the right approach, teachers and schools can increase family engagement, thereby improving student outcomes. After determining what positive engagement could reasonably look like, and identifying potential barriers, we must create paths for families to participate in students' schooling.

Accessibility Increases Engagement

Accessibility is an important way to increase parent engagement, and this can be achieved through careful planning and partnerships with students. I used to teach a study skills and college preparation elective course at a diverse Title I high school. In my classes, every combination of

historically marginalized identity (e.g., low-income, single-parent home, immigrant, emergent bilingual, ethnic/racial minoritized, undocumented status, etc.) was represented. Despite false dominant discourses about parents from marginalized and/or under-resourced communities not caring about their students' education, my teaching colleagues and I were able to get nearly 100% participation in our annual Family Night. We accomplished this through careful planning and partnership with the students. We considered possible obstacles to participation and eliminated as many as we could. We also involved the students in the planning and execution of the event, which provided another layer of incentive for the families to attend.

There were many ways we increased accessibility for our parents. We began by creating an evening event, increasing the likelihood that those with 9–5 jobs could attend. Recognizing that the event would conflict with dinner time, we provided food at the event. Students made invitations by hand in their home languages for their parents/guardians. These were supplemented with phone calls and email reminders from our team teachers. To address language and childcare barriers, students acted as interpreters, and one teacher supervised a childcare room. As transportation is also a barrier, carpools were arranged, and contact information was exchanged. Finally, students developed presentations for the night which enhanced parent motivation to attend. On invitations, we clearly indicated that food, student presentations, interpreters, childcare, and transportation would be provided so families knew what to expect. These supports also let parents know that their participation was important, and they felt genuinely welcomed.

Our program's Family Nights were the highlight of each year and helped create relationships between the students, their families, and the school that went beyond talking about grades or behavior. The positive impact of these events endured throughout their schooling. By keeping students' and families' needs in mind, we were able to successfully design meaningful opportunities for students, families, and teachers to interact. This built trust and opened communication, as well as encouraged pride in the students. While it may not be feasible to incorporate all the above elements into every event, this example provides a glimpse into the vast possibilities for deepening family engagement throughout the year, regardless of school context, grade level, or family background.

Conclusion

The number of emergent bilingual students across the state of Georgia is increasing and more educators are working with students who are learning English as an additional language. The purpose of this article was to highlight best practices that many educators are currently using and describe the positive outcomes their use can have in developing language and literacy among emergent bilinguals. While teacher education programs and school systems are working to provide the training and professional development needed to support linguistically diverse students, we feel it is important to remind educators of the effective strategies and structures they may already have in their "teaching toolbox". Sometimes, making small changes to instructional practice can make a big difference in providing English learners access to content concepts, developing language and literacy skills, and engaging families and communities.

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