

Let's Talk:

How Oral Language
Supports Literacy for
Emergent Bilinguals



LexiaTM

INTRODUCTION

Most educators, administrators, parents, and students understand the importance of literacy, or the ability to read and write, and the vital role it plays in laying the foundation for future academic and career success.

But what's not as generally understood is oral language acquisition—the ability to speak a language both conversationally and academically—and its connection to literacy development.

Research shows that oral language has a powerful impact on children's readiness for kindergarten and on their success throughout their academic careers. More specifically, oral language plays a critical role in reading instruction. That's why a focus on oral language development at an early age is essential for future academic success (Brooke, 2017).

While it may be assumed that one comes before the other—language, then literacy—research shows that effective literacy instruction should happen alongside opportunities for oral language development—concurrently rather than consecutively. This is even more critical for Emergent Bilingual students, also known as English Learners (ELs).

Emergent Bilinguals are the fastest-growing group of students in grades K–12. By 2025, one out of four children in classrooms across the United States will be an Emergent Bilingual (NEA, 2020). They're a diverse group of students, representing various cultures, ethnicities, nationalities, and more than four hundred languages (Van Voorhis, 2019).



This white paper discusses the connection between oral language and literacy and explains why concurrent development is imperative for Emergent Bilinguals' ongoing academic success.

Our terminology, explained: why Emergent Bilingual?

Challenging commonly used terms

When describing English Learners in the US, schools and districts commonly use the terms “EL” or “ELL” and categorize these students as an “intervention” group. Though widely accepted, this terminology emphasizes what these students don’t know as opposed to what they do (Van Voorhis, 2019), and often is referred to as the deficit model.

The asset of bilingualism

As a result, schools fail to recognize the benefit of English language learning: becoming bilingual. Students who can speak more than one language have demonstrated advantages in many areas, including awareness of language, communication skills, memory, decision-making, and analytical skills (Van Voorhis, 2019).

The term “Emergent Bilingual” celebrates the asset of bilingualism that these students bring to the classroom and to society—reflecting instead the asset model. An asset-based approach in the classroom helps ensure that students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content they’re taught in school (New America, 2019).



1 in 4

children will be an Emergent Bilingual by 2025

Language acquisition vs. literacy development

Understanding the connection between language and literacy starts with recognizing the difference between the two.



Language acquisition—the process by which people learn to speak or make meaning of a language based on exposure to their natural environment; can occur naturally, without formal instruction



Literacy development—the process of continuously learning and improving communication skills through listening, speaking, reading, and writing; requires a more formal education process

Creating a strong oral language foundation

The impact of oral language acquisition

Research shows that oral language has a powerful impact on children's readiness for kindergarten and on their success throughout their academic careers. Children begin to acquire oral language skills at a young age, before turning their attention to print-based concepts or reading (Brooke, 2017).

For educators, it's important to understand the six areas of oral language, as together they play a key role in reading instruction (see sidebar). Much research has shown that oral vocabulary development, for example, is essential to children's long-term reading comprehension (Newman & Roskos, 2012).

Oral language skills are vital for Emergent Bilinguals

Acquiring levels of oral language proficiency is especially critical for Emergent Bilinguals, enabling their ongoing learning and achievement (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009). Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics has proven to be very beneficial for Emergent Bilinguals learning to read in English (Manyak, 2007).

While research demonstrates the importance of oral language acquisition, it also proves the inverse to be true; children with limited oral language ability entering kindergarten are typically at a disadvantage. More than that, children with a history of oral language impairment are possibly four to five times more likely to have reading difficulties than their peers (Brooke, 2017).



Six areas of oral language

- 1 Phonology**—the organization or system of sounds within a language
- 2 Vocabulary**—includes expressive vocabulary, the words a student actively uses, and receptive vocabulary, the words that a student understands but may not necessarily use
- 3 Grammar**—the set of structural rules that govern the combination of words and phrases into sentences and paragraphs
- 4 Morphology**—the smallest units of meaning within a word and the rules about how those words are formed
- 5 Pragmatics**—the social use of language, including social norms
- 6 Discourse**—oral and written communication

Provide opportunities for speaking practice

Ultimately, to learn a language, Emergent Bilinguals need frequent opportunities to speak it. In fact, this is one of the most important ways to help newly arrived Emergent Bilinguals develop language skills (Haneda & Wells, 2012). Long-standing principles of English as a second language support this, emphasizing the need for access to competent English speakers, frequent modeling, an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable speaking their new language, and feedback that encourages elaboration (Manyak, 2007).

Typically, Emergent Bilinguals first develop receptive language, or the ability to understand and comprehend language that they hear or read in the classroom. It's often assumed that students who can follow verbal or written directions will be able to speak the language, but that's not always the case (Kaplan, 2019).

Emergent Bilinguals must also be taught expressive language, or the ability to express their wants and needs through verbal communication. In addition to supporting their literacy skills, acquiring expressive language allows students to more fully participate in classroom discussions, answer questions, and successfully demonstrate what they know during assessments (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009).



Receptive language vs. expressive language

It's often assumed that Emergent Bilinguals who have receptive language skills also have expressive language skills, but that's not always the case.



Receptive language—the ability to understand words and language, inferring communication from one's environment and experiences



Expressive language—the use of words, gestures, and writing to create a message or convey a meaning; critical for social and academic communication

Teaching language and literacy together

Concurrent, not consecutive processes

Language and literacy work hand in hand. Oral language provides a solid foundation upon which students can advance their literacy skills. However, for Emergent Bilinguals, this does not mean that oral language should be taught and/or developed first. Language acquisition and literacy development are not consecutive processes—rather, for greater success, the two should be taught concurrently.

Studies support this. Research has shown that for Emergent Bilinguals, phonological awareness in the native language predicts successful literacy acquisition in both the native language and a second language (Ford, 2010). One recent study of reading comprehension found that both reading accuracy and oral language skills together predict performance on outcome measures (Brooke, 2017).

Rigorous state standards for reading have also shed light on the importance of oral language skills and the need to teach them along with reading skills; as all students must be able to comprehend texts of increasing complexity, the “strain that weak language skills place on developing literacy skills is becoming more apparent” (Sedita, 2016).

Integrating speaking and reading instruction

In order for Emergent Bilinguals’ literacy skills to flourish, educators should provide them with daily opportunities to learn and practice oral English, while simultaneously teaching reading and other content areas (Richards-Tutor, et al., 2016). One way to do this is to break language down—or scaffold it—for students, with the expectation that students will produce language, however little, every day. Educational technology that allows students to practice speaking can also help.

In *Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners*, Francis, et al. (2006) outline key areas of focus for reading instruction for Emergent Bilingual students, which can also be applied to oral language instruction (Brooke, 2017). This includes strategies for analyzing text and breaking down its components; visualizing a story in the mind while listening or reading; and instruction about story structure, from the basic to the more complex (Brooke, 2017).

How to blend instruction for Emergent Bilinguals

- **Engage** Emergent Bilinguals in discussion groups of mixed skill levels so that students with lower vocabulary skills and limited background knowledge can benefit from hearing the discussions of their peers
- **Create** print-rich classroom environments in which books and language surround students all day
- **Read** stories with expression and intonation
- **Focus** on the phrasing and structure of sentences and stories, particularly helpful as students become more fluent readers
- **Incorporate** adaptive blended learning technology, which has proven to be an effective way to support Emergent Bilinguals by combining English language and academic learning

CONCLUSION

Research tells us that oral language plays a critical role in reading development for all students. This important connection between language and literacy deserves more focus and attention throughout schools and districts, especially as it relates to Emergent Bilingual students. Despite their growing numbers, as a group, Emergent Bilinguals statistically underperform non-Emergent Bilinguals. During the 2015–16 academic year, for example, only 67% of Emergent Bilinguals, versus 85% of

non-Emergent Bilinguals, graduated from high school on time (USDOE). The path to academic success starts at a young age, with a strong foundation. For Emergent Bilinguals, this should include the concurrent development of oral language and literacy skills. Providing these students with ample opportunities to practice their oral language skills while immersing them in print-rich classroom environments can lay the groundwork not just for reading success but also for greater academic achievement.

Learn how Lexia can help your Emergent Bilingual students speak and read with confidence at
lexialearning.com/products/rosetta-stone-english

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300 Baker Avenue, Suite 320
Concord, Massachusetts 01742
800-435-3942

lexialearning.com