

The 5 Keys to Effectively Instructing Emergent Bilinguals within a Science of Reading Context

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Introduction

Districts implementing science of reading best practices can prioritize emergent bilingual students and ensure that they are attending to both multilingual children and monolingual students in reading instruction. The science of reading emphasizes development in oracy, background knowledge, vocabulary development, phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, and sentence structure. These requisite components to reading instruction can be done with the critical lens of ensuring that comprehension and context is not sacrificed at the expense of foundational skills when teaching emergent bilinguals. The reality in classrooms is that most

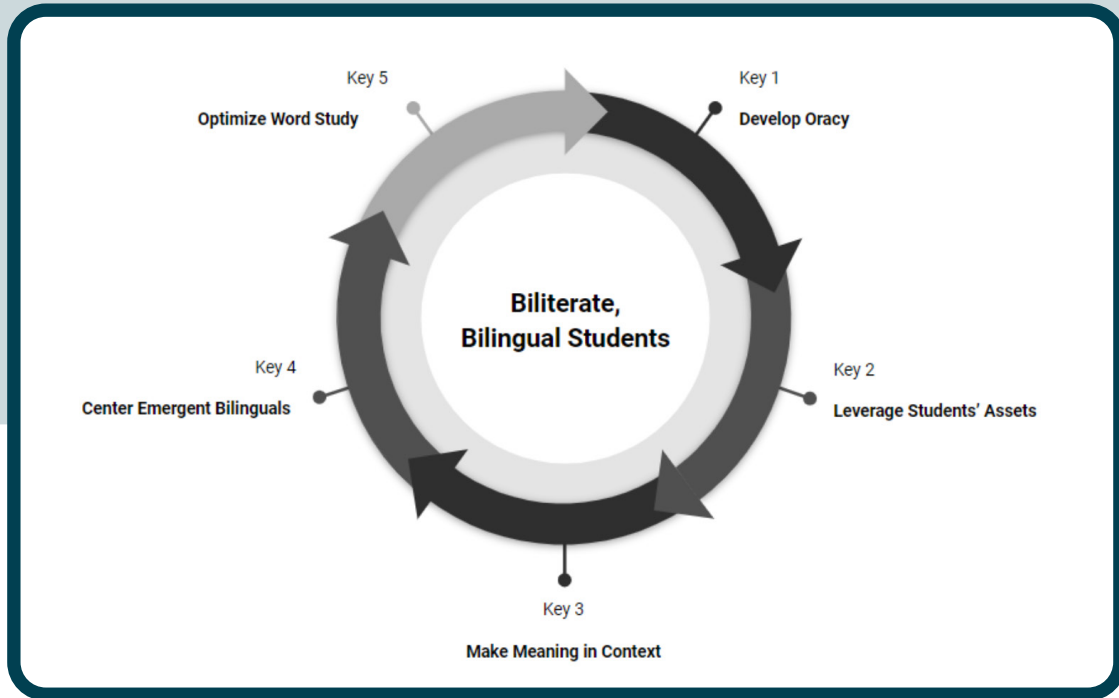


Figure 1: Five Key Strategies to Effectively Instructing Emergent Bilinguals within a Science of Reading Context

“The reality in classrooms is that most emergent bilinguals are becoming literate in a language that they are simultaneously learning to speak and understand.”

emergent bilinguals are becoming literate in a language that they are simultaneously learning to speak and understand (Goldenberg, 2020). According to Escamilla (2022), monolingual methods have been historically ineffective with bilingual learners. In this paper, we present five key strategies for supporting English Learners: developing oracy, leveraging students’ assets, making meaning in context, centering emergent bilinguals, and optimizing word study (Figure 1). By grounding instruction in these ideas, educators can emphasize science of reading and best practices for language development while teaching initial literacy in English, Spanish or both.



Key Idea 1: Develop Oracy

Emergent bilinguals benefit from explicit instruction and opportunities for structured practice with oral language skills while learning phonics (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009). The science of reading advocates for strong oral language development and “early oral language has demonstrated a growing contribution to later reading comprehension — a contribution that is separate from the important role played by the alphabetic code (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2012). Oral language develops through high-quality interactions between students and teachers as well as through explicit instruction and is the strongest predictor of emergent bilinguals’ skilled reading development and requires explicit instruction (Escamilla, 2022). As emergent bilingual children learn to decode, oracy is the foundation to ensure that comprehension is not lost or ignored (Escamilla, 2022). Teachers can utilize oracy with students to connect to the student’s schema while building reading skills and language development. The ultimate goal is for students to comprehend what they read, to make meaning of it, and to apply it to new contexts. Foundational skills cannot be given a higher priority than comprehension (Escamilla, 2022).



Emergent bilinguals must be provided ample opportunities for oracy that are intentionally planned and are situated in authentic learning connected to student lives. In the classroom, this connection can be made possible by starting with a content concept or phenomenon from student interests, identifying the authentic language needed for the task and using it in a meaningful context for an authentic purpose. Students apply their learning and make meaning together in structured peer conversations such as [turn and talk](#), [parallel lines](#), or [information gap activities](#). Educators must ensure that learners feel safe taking risks in language production that allows them to connect newly learned vocabulary and ideas with previous knowledge. Oracy activities should be deliberately planned in all content areas and scaffolded to ensure emergent bilinguals’ meaningful engagement as they refine and expand their linguistic repertoires, thus building a strong foundation for reading comprehension.

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Key Idea 2: Leverage Students' Assets

Teachers can connect students' funds of knowledge to knowledge-rich content while developing literacy instruction. The science of reading points to the importance of a knowledge-building curriculum. "The more general academic knowledge and vocabulary you have, the better at general comprehension you are (Wexler, 2020). Emergent bilinguals bring a wealth of unique assets, lived experiences, and home languages to the classroom which teachers can connect to lessons and make the learning relevant. In order to leverage those assets, teachers must first identify them and become ethnographers of their classroom. Teachers can develop a funds of knowledge inventory matrix after a home visit to get to know the students and learn about specific experiences that can be incorporated into lesson planning (Moll & Amanti, 2005).

The home language is a powerful resource to be welcomed in the classroom. The use of translanguaging in the classroom is a strategy that leverages the language practices of emergent bilingual homes and communities (Garcia, 2017). Translanguaging, or the use of alternate languages for receptive or productive purposes, facilitates meaning-making and is a scaffold to comprehension (Williams, 1994; 2002). This pedagogical practice benefits multilingual learners at all ages and grade levels. One example is the use of the [Preview-View-Review Strategy](#) with a student in order to connect to background knowledge. Another method is making space for students of similar language backgrounds to talk about what they know in their home language both before and after engaging in the learning activity. Allowing a student to retell in the language in which they are more comfortable promotes comprehension and provides a formative assessment for teachers to determine instructional moves that support student language and literacy development.

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Key 3: Make Meaning in Context

Meaning making should be at the heart of all literacy development programs. The science of reading research points to the importance of knowledge building while learning to read and in the service of learning (Cabell & Huang, 2020). “Teaching the foundational skills in the context of building and using background knowledge to make sense of text is important because... it draws on and strengthens ELLs’ oral language skills, and this, in turn supports the entire process of learning to read and write,” (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2009).

Integrating subject knowledge into literacy instruction can be achieved by thematically organizing a unit of study around content-area concepts, using a set of texts that build the content knowledge, teaching relationships among words and concepts, and engaging students in content-based discussion and writing activities constructed to develop content knowledge and language acquisition (Hoffman et al., 2021). In general practice, knowledge is viewed as needing to be activated, but a student must already possess a certain type of knowledge for this to be successful (Cabell & Huang, 2020). What is also essential is a student’s language comprehension and background knowledge in service to comprehension of text (Hoffman, Cabell, Barrueco, Hollins, & Pearson, 2021). Therefore systematically building content knowledge by leveraging literacy instruction to learn content also serves to deepen student’s language development and comprehension.

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Key 4: Center Emergent Bilinguals

Learning is more productive when new knowledge is connected to what children know and have experienced (Hoffman et al., 2021). Students’ cultures and languages must be represented in the classroom. Interacting with identity-affirming texts not only profoundly impacts learners’ literacy engagement, it also sends a clear message that their culture and language is seen, valued, and celebrated. This realization has the potential to empower learner agency as well as center the cultural and linguistic knowledge that students already possess (Hoffman et al., 2021). Teachers can reflect on text selection practices by conducting a classroom or building library audit to determine if books are representative of your learners cultural and linguistic backgrounds. School and community librarians can serve as a resource for enhancing your text collections in the service of multilingual learners. Families are also a valuable resource when partnered with in meaningful and authentic ways. Invite learners to investigate their own family experiences, and share family stories and ways of knowing and doing in the world. Teachers intentionally plan for this prior to a unit of study and consider ways for students to connect home to school learning.

Key 5: Optimize Word Study

Teachers should optimize word study for emergent bilingual students by utilizing known words that are embedded in a unit of study. Emergent bilinguals are learning literacy and an additional language simultaneously, therefore, the ultimate goal is students’ comprehension with language as a resource. “ELs required additional language support in order to bind orthography, phonology and semantics,” (Goldenberg, 2020). The glue that binds this together is context. Similarly, the science of reading has found that “a coherent, content-focused curriculum that spends at least two or three weeks digging into meaty topics, with the teacher reading aloud to the whole class from complex texts and leading thoughtful discussions is the most effective way to build the kind of academic knowledge and vocabulary that will enable them to read and write at higher levels” (Wexler, 2022). When teachers connect word study to contextualized knowledge development, emergent bilingual students operate from a leveled playing field similar to monolingual peers, when learning and internalizing rules and patterns with known words. Teachers can also enhance word study with bilingual students through metalinguistics and the explicit acknowledgement of the similarities and the differences between students’ languages. Recognition of cognates and word roots are powerful examples of word analysis particularly effective with multilingual learners.

By centering best practices for language development with the components of the science of reading research, educators can support the literacy and language development of their emergent bilingual students. The five keys of developing oracy, leveraging students’ assets, making meaning in context, centering emergent bilinguals, and optimizing word study are essential to the instruction of emergent bilingual readers regardless of programming models and are actionable and doable steps that all teachers can take in the classroom



About the Authors:



Fran Veguilla is a transformational leader, committed to equitable practices that help eliminate barriers for our more marginalized students and their families, so that they can fulfill their true potential. Fran has over 15 years of experience as a classroom teacher, bilingual/EL teacher, mentor, instructional coach, PLC facilitator, and advocate for change. Fran holds a Master's degree in Bilingual Education from Rockford University and an Educational Leadership degree from Edgewood College. She is a collaborative leader who envisions schools and programs where diversity, inclusivism, and culture are seen, valued and celebrated.

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