

Foundational Literacy Skills for Emergent Bilingual Learners



Introduction

Approximately 5 million students enrolled in public schools in the United States are emergent bilingual learners, roughly 10 percent of total student enrollment. Emergent bilingual learners represent a highly diverse group of students with valuable cultural and linguistic assets (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). “While some widely used norms [in schools] consider children’s diverse cultural background, language, and beliefs [when instructing students], others may not, basing norms for language proficiency and competencies on the development of children raised in monolingual English households” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017, p. 292).

Learning to read in English is more complex for emergent bilingual learners, who may vary considerably in their preparation for English literacy instruction in formal educational settings. If emergent bilingual learner students already read in their first language, the transition to English is much easier, as many literacy skills transfer across languages. In fact, literacy development in their first language prepares students to acquire literacy skills in multiple languages (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). However, when emergent bilingual learner students are not literate in their first language, they need support that helps them leverage their culture, development in their first language, and background in learning to read in English (NCELA, 2007).

However, literacy instruction alone, even if skillfully delivered, is not sufficient for emergent bilingual learners to reach English proficiency. Emergent bilingual learners need a comprehensive oral-language-development program that supports literacy development in addition to robust language development. Oral language provides the foundation for literacy, and emergent bilingual learners, therefore, need daily opportunities to learn and practice the English language (The Education Alliance, n.d. [b]).

Although instructional approaches for emergent bilingual learners may differ from those for monolingual learner students, emergent bilingual learner students can achieve both English-language and reading proficiency. To accomplish these goals, emergent bilingual learners need research-based supports and instruction that enable them to acquire foundational reading skills, as well as instruction that supports them in transferring knowledge from their first language to the process of learning to read in English. Decades of research have identified effective approaches for teaching reading to emergent bilingual learners. These effective instructional approaches are

- assess and monitor literacy in English;
- provide explicit, systematic instruction;
- develop academic English;
- provide feedback on language development and literacy; and
- develop the five basic reading skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension).

Assess and Monitor Progress

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide (Gersten et al., 2007) for teaching literacy to emergent bilingual learner students recommends assessing student performance and monitoring progress. Early-reading measures (assessing phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading) are an excellent way of predicting which students may encounter difficulty while learning to read, even when they are administered to students who know little English.

Imagine Language & Literacy's adaptive assessments are used to place students in the various curriculum strands such as vocabulary, conversation, literacy, and grammar, and to identify students' levels of performance. Performance results are available immediately, and teachers can see where students have been placed within curriculum strands and students' performance in literacy and language-development domains. As emergent bilingual learner students advance in Imagine Language & Literacy, their progress is monitored via embedded assessments. Instruction is adjusted automatically based on student progress, and teachers can review progress as frequently as desired.

Explicit, Systematic Instruction

Explicit instruction is systematic and includes modeling of new skills, demonstration of strategies for solving problems and complex tasks, guided practice with feedback, and support for concept formation with exam-ples and non-examples (Graves et al., 2004; Haager et al., 2003; Martinez, 2011; Saunders et al., 2013). Systematically designed instruction helps students acquire skills that provide the foundation for more complex learning. Lessons should be sequenced to build foundational skills, with lessons building on previous skills learned when introducing new concepts.

When new concepts or skills are introduced in Imagine Language & Literacy, skills are first demonstrated, and then students are shown or told what to do. For example, when emergent bilingual learners are learning letter names and sounds, a letter is shown on the screen, and the narrator says the name of the letter and the letter's sound. The same instructional process is used for more complex skills. For example, in comprehension lessons teaching the concept of main idea, the program narrator explicitly states the steps for identifying the main idea and then demonstrates how to determine the main idea of a short passage. Students are then guided through practice opportunities to enable them to learn new skills. Throughout the program, lessons incorporate this effective instructional sequence to promote successful learning.

Imagine Language & Literacy is systematically designed to provide instruction that is appropriate for students' current levels of performance. No two students will be on the same learning pathway. For both language development and literacy, skills are sequenced to provide foundational learning first. For language development, students who need to develop basic vocabulary first learn functional words prior to being exposed to beginning academic vocabulary. As they master vocabulary, they then learn intermediate and advanced academic vocabulary, along with domain-specific vocabulary. Similarly, literacy lessons start with foundational phonemic-awareness lessons before progressing to phonics. Students learn vocabulary that enables them to read instructional-level texts, and comprehension skills align when students learn to read decodable texts before moving to leveled readers.

Develop Academic English

Academic English refers to the register of language used in school for academic learning, and includes the ability to read, write, listen, and speak using this register (DiCerbo et al., 2014). The development of academic language is critical for school engagement and success. Academic language skills enable students to understand formal structures and words found in books and heard at school, and to learn how to process complex forms of language that include inferential and narrative language and academic vocabulary (Foorman et al., 2016).

Academic language skills are explicitly taught in Imagine Language & Literacy. Students learn how to compare elements of reading selections and learn language associated with analyzing text. Comprehension sequences of pre-reading strategies, questioning during and after reading, and summarization help students learn and practice using inferential language skills of problem and solution, cause and effect, and author's purpose.

Imagine Language & Literacy includes interesting selections, ranging from legends and folk tales to brief fictional stories and informational texts. Beginning readers learn to sequence events and how to answer literal and inferential questions about fictional characters and events. In transition and leveled book lessons, students learn story elements such as character, plot, and setting. As books advance in difficulty, students are exposed to increasingly complex grammatical structures and story elements.

The Imagine Learning Language & Literacy program explicitly teaches and spirals academic and domain-specific vocabulary throughout the curriculum. The program teaches more than 800 cross-curricular words and reinforces these words 8–12 times. Before students read a text, instruction previews critical domain words. As students advance in reading material, they learn general academic words such as *explain* and *compare*, and are then exposed to domain-specific words such as *subtract* and *experiment*.

Practice with Feedback

Emergent bilingual learners need many and varied opportunities to practice language and literacy skills while receiving feedback and assistance from teachers (Graves et al., 2004; Haager et al., 2003; Jensen, 2005; Francis et al., 2006; Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). Practice for emergent bilingual learners should be interesting, not just repetitive. Students should be actively engaged in learning activities (i.e., having the opportunity to respond frequently) while receiving instructive feedback (Jensen, 2005).

Imagine Language & Literacy provides multiple and varied interactions with vocabulary words and literacy activities. For example, when students learn new vocabulary, they are prompted to repeat the new word, shown an illustration of the word's meaning, and directed to practice using the word in context. Imagine Language & Literacy also provides opportunities to listen to and read content-area selections, offering students additional practice with academic language. For example, before students read a leveled article about the development of vaccines, they study key vocabulary words (*observe* and *hypothesize*) and interact with the program as they determine related words and appropriate context for the target vocabulary word. For all instructional activities, students receive immediate and corrective feedback regarding their performance.

Foundational Reading Skills

The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as necessary for learning to read. Emergent bilingual learners must acquire foundational skills in reading, in addition to developing oral language necessary for comprehension (Shanahan & August, 2006; Education Alliance, n.d. (a), 2007; Francis et al., 2006; Moughamian et al., 2009).

Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during their first two years of school (NRP, 2000). If students have phonemic awareness in their first language, they can readily trans-fer that knowledge to a second language (McIntosh, Graves, & Gersten, 2007; Gersten & Geva, 2003; McIntosh et al., 2007). However, if the new language they are learning has new phonemes—phonemes that may not exist in their home language—then they will need explicit instruction in producing these sounds (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007; Atwill et al., 2009).

Imagine Language & Literacy provides robust phonemic-awareness instruction (including rhyming, segmenting and blending sound, and sound manipulation and isolation) and language support in students' native languages. If sounds in English do not exist in students' home languages, those sounds are taught to students first.

Phonics instruction refers to teaching the structure of English, beginning with letter-sound correspondences through the reading of connected text. If emergent bilingual learners are experiencing difficulty decoding words, they should receive explicit, systematic, and intensive phonics instruction (Gersten et al., 2007). Effective phonics instruction for emergent bilingual learners includes explicitly teaching letter/sound correspondences, providing students the opportunity to work with word families and spelling patterns, and applied practice with letter-sound correspondences.

Imagine Language & Literacy teaches phonics explicitly. Within instructional sequences, students are told letter names and sounds, and provided with ample opportunity to learn phonics as they discriminate between specific letters and sounds and develop automaticity. Imagine Language & Literacy includes analogy-based phonics once letter sounds are mastered. Emergent bilingual learners are taught word families and spelling patterns that are then practiced in connected texts.

Vocabulary development is perhaps the most necessary element of literacy instruction for emergent bilingual learners. Without an understanding of key vocabulary, it is impossible to comprehend reading selections. For emergent bilingual learners, vocabulary instruction should teach essential content and words in depth. In addition, students should be taught the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned (Gersten et al., 2007).

Vocabulary instruction is a key component of Imagine Language & Literacy. Students learn basic and academic vocabulary that is contextualized to facilitate learning. The program directly teaches vocabulary with video illustrations of meaning, peer modeling, and visualizations. The program provides students with multiple opportunities to reinforce mastery of new words through practice.

Reading fluency is more than speed and accuracy—it also includes phrasing, prosody, and inflection. Each of these is considered an indicator of comprehension, as readers must understand the meaning of a sentence in order to give it the right expression (Francis et al., 2006). In developing fluency, emergent bilingual learners benefit from models of fluent reading, opportunities to re-read the same text, word meaning, and background knowledge for reading passages (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007).

Imagine Language & Literacy book sequences support fluency. Students hear models of fluent reading and have the opportunity to read and record digital books, including Read-Along, Transition, and Leveled Books, which cover a variety of literary genres, including myths, plays, poems, biographies, and narrative selections.

Comprehension instruction is particularly important for emergent bilingual learners. There is considerable research showing that emergent bilingual learners acquire foundational skills in reading, but there is often a breakdown with reading comprehension (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007). One likely cause of this difficulty is emergent bilingual learners often encounter more unfamiliar English words and fewer familiar topics while reading than their monolingual English peers (Garcia, 1991; Jimenez et al., 1996; Giroir et al., 2015).

Imagine Language & Literacy explicitly teaches emergent bilingual learners comprehension strategies, such as how to identify main idea and supporting details, points and reasons, author's purpose, and story elements. Additionally, emergent bilingual learners are explicitly taught how to answer questions that require background knowledge. If students answer inferential questions incorrectly, they are shown the page of the story containing the partial answer. If they answer incorrectly again, background knowledge and reasoning are supplied. For students with first-language support enabled, this explanation is provided in the student's first language.

Conclusion

Emergent bilingual learners represent the fastest-growing population of students in the United States. While these students bring considerable assets to the classroom, they require additional instructional support to gain reading and language proficiency in English. Research demonstrates that the most effective instruction for emergent bilingual learner students in literacy includes assessing and monitoring skills; providing explicit, systematic instruction; developing academic English; providing feedback on both language development and literacy; and developing the five foundational reading skills. Imagine Learning is committed to meeting the needs of emergent bilingual learner students and the educators who serve them by providing research-based instruction.

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