Exploring a Multifaceted Approach to Teaching Emergent Bilingual Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the relationship between Elementary teachers and emergent bilingual students formerly known as ESL (English as a second language) or ELL (English Language learners). Emergent bilinguals are students that speak another language other than English at home. These students become emergent bilinguals by acquiring English at school and continue to practice their native language at home (Garcia, et. al, 2018). Data was collected from interviewing a former emergent bilingual student enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a three-week field study at an Elementary school, and scholarly articles. One of the most misunderstood issues in prekindergarten to 12th-grade education today is how to educate students who are not deemed proficient in English (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). There is a misconception that many emergent bilingual students are recent immigrants or foreigners (Garcia, et. al, 2018). Zong and Batalova (2015a) report that 77% of emergent bilinguals are U.S born. The Department of Education shows that there are 5 million students with limited English skills while there is only one qualified teacher for every 100 ELLs (Zhao, 2002). Findings suggest that one of the most effective programs to aid these students are Dual Language Immersion (DLI) classrooms. One implication is for teachers to examine their state standards and adjust the curriculum that best suit the need for these students to help bridge the gap.

1. **Introduction**

Language is intimately linked to culture. It is a primary means by which people express their cultural values and the lens through which they view the world (Nieto & Bode, 2018). The language practices that children bring to school also invariably affect how and what they learn (Nieto & Bode, 2018). Yet even in the field of multicultural education, native-language issues are sometimes overlooked or downplayed (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

One of the most misunderstood issues in prekindergarten to 12th-grade education today is how to educate students who are not deemed proficient in English (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2018). There is a misconception that many emergent bilingual students are recent immigrants or foreigners (Garcia, et. al, 2018). Zong and Batalova (2015a) report that 77% of emergent bilinguals are U.S born. Many of these students speak another language other than English at home. These students become emergent bilinguals by acquiring English at school and continue to practice their native language at home (Garcia, et. al, 2018). We need to assess the degree to which teachers are fully equipped to address the unique and robust needs of these students.

2. **Statement of Problem**

Emergent bilingual students are pressed to have a basic understanding of English to succeed in academia in a short time frame compared to their native English-speaking peers (Hawkins, 2004). In 2016 ELL students represented 4.9 million of the student

population in the United States compared to 3.8 million students in the fall of 2000

(NCES, 2019). Since 2002 there were 5 million students with limited English skills and

only one qualified teacher for every 100 ELLs (Zhao, 2002). Students who struggle with

bilingualism are more likely to drop out of school than those fluent in both languages

(Nieto & Bode, 2018). As educators we must address the needs of these students through

research on second language acquisition (SLA) in classrooms.

Deficit theories assume that some children, because of genetic, cultural, or

experiential differences, are inferior to other children- that is, that they have deficits that

must be overcome if they are to learn (Nieto & Bode, 2018). As the "achievement gap"

grows, theories about cultural deprivation and genetic inferiority are once again being

used to explain differences in intelligence and achievement, and the implications of these

deficit theories continue to influence educational policies and practices (Nieto & Bode,

2018).

Some emergent bilingual students tend to lack automaticity when learning another

language. Automaticity is when you are fluent in a language and do not pause as often

and reply quickly (Graves, M.J., Juel, C., Graves, B.B., Dweitz, P. 2011). Greater

automaticity can lead to greater confidence and an overall sense of fluency or comfort. It

is often difficult for these students to keep up with their peers when they speak one

language at home and must speak another at school. It takes longer for these students to

answer simple questions because they are processing it in two languages instead of one.

For instance, when a teacher asks an emergent bilingual student a question, they will

translate what they heard in English back into their native language silently in their head.

Then translate it back to English in order to respond. This process takes longer and that is

why there are hiccups to their automaticity and they tend pause often and do not respond immediately.

Immigrant or migrant students are often defined by what they *lack* and will be seen as incompetent because of their limited English skills. This often leads to negative psychological and emotional associations with school, and consequently, academic performance (Cummins, 2011). Labeling students causes unintentional psychological harm and can make these students feel more inadequate compared to their peers. Some teachers will look at a student and think this child is struggling because he has a learning disability or this student is behind because they are an emergent bilingual student. These labels give students the false impression that they should live up to their label and not strive to do better than what is expected of them. It is imperative that teachers follow a culturally responsive approach to working with all of their students for them to feel valued in the classroom.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Reading and Comprehension

When emergent bilinguals begin reading, they may read at a slower pace than their peers. Which gives them the impression that if they aren't on the same page as their classmates they are not as smart. Eventually some of them will continue to fall further behind and stop trying to keep up with their classmates. If these students continue to dislike reading, they fall into what is called the Matthew Effect. *The Matthew Effect* is difficulty with reading which promotes disinterest, dislike and avoidance (Graves, et. Al, 2011). When children have trouble reading, they will revert to the Matthew effect. When students struggle with reading, they will have more difficulty keeping up with their peers.

Not only do they read at a slower pace but they will eventually loathe reading and avoid it when they can. This becomes problematic in the future because these students will have difficulty understanding prompts in the text and fall further behind.

When teachers first assess students' academic ability, they might confuse an emergent bilingual student with having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Both emergent bilingual students and SLD take longer to complete assignments and may need more support (Barbian, Gonzales, and Mejia, 2017). However, an emergent bilingual student is actually increasing their cognitive load because they are processing information in a second language. While students with SLD have a learning block in their brain (Barbian, Gonzales, and Mejia, 2017). It is easy to confuse the two from an outside perspective but teachers should take the time to get to know their students before jumping to conclusions.

3.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy facilitates and supports the achievement of all students (Richards, Brown, Forde, 2007). In a culturally responsive classroom, effective teaching and learning occur in a culturally supported, learner-centered context, whereby the strengths and students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement (Richards, et. Al, 2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy comprises of three dimensions: (a) institutional, (b) personal, (c) instructional (Richards, et. Al, 2007). When teachers follow a culturally responsive pedagogy it benefits all students.

When students feel connected to school, they identify as learners, and they have a far greater chance of becoming successful students (Nieto & Bode, 2018). When they feel that they do not belong, identifying as a learner is more difficult (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

When kids feel pressure not to be who they are in school the academic energy goes down. The cultural competence of the adults is intimately connected to achievement.

Basic characteristics of culturally responsive teaching are (Ladson-Billings, 1994):

1. **Positive perspectives on parents and families** Teachers should include parents or caregivers by incorporating their ideas into the class curriculum. This allows the parent to address the student's hopes, concerns, or suggestions. Since the parent is their child's first teacher, they will know how to best assess what their needs are.

2. **Communication of high expectations** Culturally relevant teaching recognizes the need for students to experience excellence without deceiving them about their own academic achievement. Rewarding students for a wide array of activities ensures that they understand that hard - and - fast rules do not exist for determining excellence. It also underscores the students' understanding that the teacher has high expectations for each of them (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

3. **Learning within the context of culture** This notion of cultural congruence is meant to signify the ways in which the teachers altered their speech patterns, communication styles, and participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students' own culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Like the notion of cultural appropriateness, these terms are in a sociolinguistic lexicon used to analyze the ways in which schools can be made more accessible to culturally diverse learners (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

4. **Student-centered instruction** this differs from the traditional teacher-centered instruction. Learning is cooperative, collaborative, and community-oriented. Students are encouraged to direct their own learning and to work with other students on research

projects and assignments that are both culturally and socially relevant to them. Students become self-confident, self-directed, and proactive (The Education Alliance, 2020).

5. **Culturally mediated instruction** incorporates and integrates diverse ways of knowing, understanding, and representing information. Instruction and learning take place in an environment that encourages multicultural viewpoints and allows for inclusion of knowledge that is relevant to the students (The Education Alliance, 2020).

6. **Reshaping the curriculum** by building bridges or a scaffolding that meets students where they are (intellectually and functionally), culturally relevant teaching helps them to be where they need to be to participate fully and meaningfully in the construction of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1994). If a student is struggling the instructor can help them by building on the skills, they already have that allows them to make connections to the new learning. By providing them with a few structural clues, this builds their confidence, allowing them to solve some problems on their own and feel free to ask questions later.

7. **Teacher as facilitator** the instructor sees themself as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community, encourages students to do the same. Teacher helps guide instead of dictate students to make connections between their community, national, and global identities. Teacher sees teaching as "pulling knowledge out" —like "mining" (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods not only see themselves as professionals but also strongly identify with teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

3.3 Funds of Knowledge

Students and families have their own culturally- and community-embedded funds of knowledge, and effective teachers and schools incorporate these into curriculum and

pedagogy (Hawkins, 2019). It is an asset-based perspective on learning- drawing on what students know and bring to the classroom- and beings to counter the often deficit-based views of plurilingual learners' home languages and cultures (Hawkins, 2019). Using what they know and bring to school as the foundation on which to build further knowledge and skills (Hawkins, 2019).

Teachers must learn about the basics of language, including vernacular dialects and registers (Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000), understand the sociopolitical context of their language patterns and use (how they are or are not publicly valued), and work to create an environment where all language and literacy practices are accepted and respected (Hawkins, 2019).

3.4 Importance of Home Language

Language represents and conveys cultural beliefs, identities, and practice (Hawkins & Graue, 2008). Using children's first language to support learning in the second not only strengthens the content matter understanding of the children, but it also tells them that their language is valued in their school (Hawkins, et. al, 2008).

Cultural and linguistic connections can play a key role in students' academic success (Nieto & Bode, 2018). When language and culture is valued at home and school it sends the message that they are valued. If they are valued only in the home, students may develop conflicted feelings about their identities (Nieto & Bode, 2018). The larger society also plays a key role in student learning. If young people see their culture devalued in things such as political initiatives (e.g., propositions to limit immigration, abolish bilingual education, or ban gay marriage), they are certain to develop conflicted attitudes concerning their ethnic group, family and social culture (Niteo & Bode, 2018).

3.5 Parent and Teacher Communication

Researchers have found that parent involvement and student achievement are linearly related with higher involvement comes better student outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Educators should get to know the parents and community their student grew up in order to fully understand where they are coming from.

The best way to learn about their way of life is doing a home visit because it is more personable and it is not on professional ground where the teacher is deemed as the expert and the parent may feel uncomfortable (Hawkins, 2019). When we get to know the student's family, we will discover that they may have different cultural views on success compared to traditional Americans. The idea where you go to college, graduate, and then get a good job. While some family's models of success are for their children to remain close to family, be exemplary community members (teachers, firefighters, police officers) and take care of their families (Valdes, 1996).

3.6 Benefits of being bilingual

In studying 7-month-old babies raised in bilingual households, Agnes Kovacs and Jacques Mehler at the International School for Advanced Studies in Trieste, Italy, found that ilingual babies are precocious decision makers who demonstrate enhanced cognitive control (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Neurologists have found that bilingual brains stay sharp longer than monolingual brains. Specifically, a team of Canadian researchers studied people being treated for dementia and found those who were bilingual reported a later onset of the symptoms of

dementia- specifically, about four years later- than those who were monolingual (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

Bilingualism is associated with increased attention control, working memory, metalinguistic awareness, and abstract reasoning, all of which can contribute positively to academic success (Nieto & Bode, 2018). Rather than being an impediment to academic achievement, bilingualism can actually promote learning (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

4.   **Methods**

For this interview I asked a former emergent bilingual student born and raised in Miami, Florida whose parents are originally from Thailand. She is a PhD student enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the School of Education. When I conducted this interview, I continued to use the acronym ELL instead of emergent bilingual for the convenience for speech and brevity.

Qualitative research and Research Questions for Interviews:

1. Were you in any ELL (English language learner) programs growing up? If so, can you tell me about it? Growing up in Miami, Florida I can recall being the only Asian student in my classrooms. Going into Elementary school I remember not speaking or knowing English at all. I was placed in ESOL program at my school where they would pull me out of the classroom to work on grammar, spelling, etc. At the time the instructor primarily spoke Spanish to cater to the other ELL students in the class. This often left me confused and made me feel left out. At our school we had the F-CAT which is the standardized assessment and for the ethnicity portion I checked Hispanic. Primarily because of how my classroom was from instruction and all my peer interaction.

2. What do you think is the most effective program model, and why?

I think question is hard to answer because it really depends on the settings, the students that you are serving and which program you are implementing. I love the idea of Dual-Language Immersion (DLI) programs but what I have noticed is that there are only certain students that wind up in these programs. Whether the student's parents are really active in trying to get their children into this program. Or the student population has a high demand for a Spanish speaking population. I still really like the immersion-style where you have the mainstream classroom of all learners in the same room.

3. What should teachers know and be able to do to adequately to support English learners?

I think getting to know your ELL students is crucial to supporting them. Also get to know their families and try to have them engaged in the classroom. By drawing ideas on what they like to do at home we can implement it into the classroom curriculum.

4. What are some challenges ELL students face in school settings? If the students moved to a different school or area it could cause challenges. Are the teachers creating curriculum that suits the needs for ELL students? What are they targeting specifically, or not? How are the teachers grouping the students to work with one another? Are they providing comprehensible input or output?

5. How do we address the needs of the ELL students whose native language doesn't have high status language? (Hmong, Laotian, Quechua, etc) Often times these students also get placed into the DLI programs with the same instruction. Teachers try to adapt to what they are already doing with their Spanish speakers. However, if the teachers do not share the same background knowledge or structure of what our language to make those connections it becomes very difficult. Teachers could reach out to family members for

volunteers as another resource in the classroom. By allowing them to work with their children to help them learn. Sometimes teachers are hesitant to ask parents to family members to do this because they don't want to be intrusive.

6. What is the role of the student's home language in schooling?

It is incredibly crucial! Teachers should be drawing on this, celebrating it, and bringing to the home front. Since a student's home language is their first language, we should bring it into the classroom. By doing a compare and contrast in terms of language structure and grammar.

7. Can you give me examples of activities or lessons teachers can use to promote bilingualism? Draw on the students' interest and emphasize on the language piece and implement it into a lesson. Think it through and address language goals or objectives.

8. What do you think the composition of a dual-immersion (DLI) class should be? Ideally you want 50/50. Fifty percent of native English speakers and fifty percent of the target language. The only issue I see with this is the population of this is that they are often underrepresented. African American children for example are often excluded from these programs. Another issue is the problem with having a Hmong student for example who are in these classrooms. Perhaps there are three, four or five languages represented in the classroom but we seldom implement their native languages into the curriculum.

9. How can schools, families and communities effectively work together to support the education of English learning students? Creating partnerships with all of them is crucial. By reaching out to the parents as a partner in terms of how to best educate their child. Parents are their child's first instructor and they should know what's best way for them to learn. I strongly encourage home visits because when you have conferences or science

fair the parents only see their child in an academic setting. The communication is only one-sided where the teacher tells them about all the things, they have accomplished at school by reaching certain benchmarks. To really support these learners, we should really have that two-way communication.

The study from which this paper originates is part of a field study of emergent bilingual students' interaction with their peers and instructor. The data was collected from observing students in a classroom setting throughout a permitted short span of three weeks for a total of five hours. The names have been changed to protect the students' identities. We will observe the students writing and reading abilities along with comprehension.

Settings and Participants

During the past three weeks (2/25/20-3/3/20) I conducted a field study at Lincoln Elementary School in Whitewater, Wisconsin. I observed fourth graders in a classroom setting that ranged from various language abilities; to native-English speakers, emergent bilingual students and there was one student in particular who just moved to the United States with limited English proficiency. I worked with a Caucasian, female, pre-service teacher, to document the pedagogical choices she has made to create an engaging learning environment for these diverse group of students. My research poses the question on how well do these students engage academically with their peers and instructor.

Essential Questions

Here are a few questions to consider while conducting the field study.

- Does the classroom environment and how the teacher interacts with their students affect how engaged they are when it comes to learning?

- How do peers influence our learning in the classroom?

- How does one react from positive versus negative associations with classmates? Findings from these questions provide us with insight into how peer interactions within the classroom leave longer lasting impressions. That may affect the students' attitudes towards school and learning.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations took place from February 25th 2020 to March 3rd 2020. I scheduled a visit two times per week. Observations usually lasted from sixty minutes to two hours. The time I visited was from 8am-9am on Tuesdays and on Thursdays it was from 8am-10am. Over the course of the study, I made a total of five visits to this classroom.

I wrote field notes during my visit, and then later retyped them. As a university-based researcher I functioned as a participant-observer in the classroom. In this role sometimes I served as a tutor or teacher's aide and student group member. Within a few short days, I developed a rapport with the students and they seemed to enjoy my presence.

On one particular day, I observed and detailed a student's language and participation during a vocabulary lesson. This student is a recent immigrant from Benin with limited English proficiency. The other student is a native-born U.S citizen. The names have been changed to protect their identity. The teacher begins the vocabulary lesson by telling the students to use their own source of knowledge. Immediately one of the students' Jessica asks Lilly (the one who just moved here from Benin). The conversation went as follows:

Jessica: "Do you know what knowledge means?"

(*before Lilly could respond Jessica quickly retorts*)

Jessica: "it's what you think!"

(*Lilly rolls her eyes and then lets out a heavy sigh*).

The following day I observed a conversation between two students with similar backgrounds like Jessica and Lilly. Except one of them is a male Spanish-speaking student while the other is native-born. To start the reading activity the teacher asks the students "what they think a VHS/ Cassette player is?"

The interaction went as follows:

Victor: "I think it's like an Xbox."

Victor: "It looks just like a game console."

Victor: "I remember seeing one at my grandma's house!"

Then he starts reminiscing about his family and how he got one for Christmas and then he immediately notices how disinterested his partner looks.

Megan: *She nodded her head, smirked, and then quickly turned away from him. After this incident, they didn't really interact with each other for the remainder of class.*

Collective Interpretation and Analysis

Interpreting and analyzing the data from this research has been challenging but very proactive. Drawing from the first interview with the graduate student from UW-Madison the interviewee emphasizes the importance of having teachers build a strong relationship with their students. By getting to know the student's interests, values, beliefs and culture in doing so the teachers also build a stronger relationship within their community and with their parents or caregiver. This idea is also noted by suggesting all

classrooms follow the culturally responsive pedagogy; that are persistent throughout the literature review. Overall developing this double-consciousness can help unveil the privileges of White pre-service teachers and deconstruct the idea of meritocracy while simultaneously introducing a veil as they read the world in which they live from conscious locations and positioning (Price-Denning & Souto-Maning, 2010).

After observing the students at Lincoln Elementary school, we notice that for peer interaction and socializing it was evident that the emergent bilingual students were reluctant to interact with their fellow native- English speaking classmates. A clear example of this was the interaction between Jessica and Lilly or Victor and Megan. Jessica spoke to Lilly in a way that was a form of chastisement. While Megan seemed disinterested in anything Victor had to say and would even turn her chair away from him. As a subtle indicator through body language that she did not care.

5. Conclusion

Proficiency in English is not sufficient to meet the nation's needs in a shrinking world, nor the needs of individual citizens who interact with other people's cultures more than at any other time in human history (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2018).

When educators work with the student's family, community, and staff on addressing the needs of emergent bilinguals we need to bridge the gap between the inequalities in education. By giving the students the right support and sharing the same goals in terms of success. Learning more than one language is more beneficial in the long term and being bilingual expands your cognitive and executive functioning skills (Barbian, et. Al, 2017). It is crucial to work with educators to aid students whose language skills are still

developing and is not yet deemed proficient in English. By helping these students become more valuable assets to society and for future generations to come.

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