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Research into Practice:

LITERACY

Word Study with Emergent Bilinguals

BY LORI HELMAN, PH.D.

Emergent bilinguals are students who speak one language at home and are learning a new one at school. Many students speak a home language other than English and participate in schooling in English. Instead of labeling students by what they don't yet know ("English learners"), the term emergent bilingual acknowledges that students already have a language and are becoming bilingual by learning English. In a similar light, students in dual immersion programs who do much of their learning in a new language are also emergent bilinguals; examples might include native English-speaking students who participate in a French or Spanish immersion school. Word study with students learning in a new language will need to be differentiated to build on students' strengths and address their language needs.

Word study instruction involves helping students understand how words work in a given language. Like many languages, English is alphabetic, and that means that letters represent sounds in regular ways. In alphabetic languages such as English, studying words means learning about the relationships between letters and sounds; understanding how letter combinations form predictable spelling patterns; and perceiving meaningful chunks in words that facilitate word creation and help in discovering meaning (e.g., un-think-able). Through all of these steps in word learning, vocabulary development is paramount.

In this paper, you will find out more about what can be done to tailor word study instruction to be most effective for emergent bilinguals and empower students to build on the resources that they bring with them to the classroom. Whether you speak English, Spanish, or are bilingual, there are many actions you can take to help make word study using *Words Their Way Classroom* or *Palabras a su Paso Salón de Clases* accessible and productive for your students.

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The Vocabulary Challenge

Developing literacy is a process that involves both code-based skills and language knowledge. For example, reading requires a person to not only be able to decode words on the page but also interpret those words into meaningful ideas. The idea that both word identification and language comprehension must be in place is called the simple view of reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) and holds true for students learning to read in a second language as well (Verhoeven & Van Leeuwe, 2012). Unlike native speakers of a language, however, second language learners are likely to know significantly fewer words in the language of instruction at school and also may be challenged by separating the flow of oral language into distinct words, using grammatical cues to construct meaning, and having a depth of knowledge about the multiple meanings of words (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013). For this reason, the language side of the equation in literacy development is likely to be more difficult than the word recognition component for emergent bilinguals.

Students who attend a classroom program in a new language may know anywhere from a few words to thousands of words in the language of instruction, but they do not often know as many words as native speakers of the same age. Michael Graves and colleagues estimate that through the course of their time at school all students will be expected to learn approximately 3,000 to 4,000 words per year (Graves et al., 2013). Emergent bilinguals who potentially bring hundreds, rather than thousands, of words in the language of instruction with them to school will not only need to learn a foundation of words quickly, but also continue to learn vocabulary at a vigorous rate each year in order to keep up with academic expectations.

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Because vocabulary is so critical to reading and writing with understanding, word study with emergent bilinguals can never focus solely on technical aspects of word construction (e.g., sounds and spelling patterns), but also must take aim at the meanings of words and how they occur in the new language. In the rest of this paper we’ll explore a number of practical ways to structure word study so that it forefronts language and vocabulary development, builds on and values the linguistic knowledge students already have, and keeps students actively engaging with material in a new language.

Integrate Language Development into Word Study

For emergent bilinguals at the early stages of language development, it is helpful to begin word study using pictures. The first step is to review the picture cards in the lesson and teach any unknown words. If there are too many unknown words to teach at one time, concentrate on about five new words each day. This will help students not to become overloaded by the sheer number of new words to learn. Show a picture of the word, say it and have students repeat the word, and check to see that students understand its meaning. For example, in a lesson comparing the beginning sounds of *c* and *h* the teacher held up each word card and asked the students what it represented. Students had difficulty with the words *cart, cape,* and *hay*, so the teacher taught these words by a) stating the name while showing the picture, b) having students echo her pronunciation of the word, c) guiding students to repeat a kid-friendly definition (e.g., *The cart makes it easier to move heavy things.*), and d) asking students to respond to a simple prompt (e.g., *What can a cart carry? A cart can carry a* _____.) Over time, phonics sorts can consist of some picture items and some words. It is especially helpful if there are pictures that match the words so that students can make the oral-to-print connection.

Concept sorts can also use picture cards and in this kind of sort items are categorized according to their common properties. For example, pictures could be sorted that represent whether they are food items or not, whether they represent a plant or an animal, or which wildlife habitat they belong to. Concept sorts are a good jumping off point for vocabulary and language development because students can do them even as they are learning the labels in a new language day by

day. They are also a springboard for creating sentences that students can adapt using their growing language skills, such as *A ___ is food, but a ___ is not food.* Many more ideas for using picture sorts are described in the book for teachers *Words Their Way with English Learners* (Helman, Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2012).

Word study also presents many opportunities for students to practice their language skills—as they read the words or pictures out loud in their sorts, when they work collaboratively with partners, and as they play games in small group settings. Teachers can ensure that these language-embedded word study activities are successful by clearly outlining the procedures, creating charts that include visuals to help students understand the steps in the process, and ensuring that students follow guidelines for respectful behavior (e.g., no put downs, equitable turn taking, etc.). Language is learned when it is used, and a classroom with lots of interaction enables all of the students to be both teachers and learners all through the day (Helman, 2012).

Build on What Students Know

Emergent bilinguals bring a home language to school and word study instruction can build on their capabilities in two languages. If students already know the meaning of a word or concept in their home language, it is easier to learn the label in a new language. For example, a student who knows the meaning of the word *ocean* in English will have an easier time learning the meaning of the word in Spanish, *océano*.

To find out more about what students bring to school, ask them to draw a picture and write words to tell a story in their home language. If students feel insecure about this, tell them to do it "the best they can." See what students can produce and, if necessary, find a colleague or community member who speaks the language who can give you some feedback on the extent of students' literacy skills. If the student brings a home language to school that is alphabetic, try to notice how many of the sound-symbol relationships are similar to English and begin instruction with these common sounds. You can also find out more about students' home language strengths by asking students when they use the language, with whom, and how many relatives or friends they have who only speak that language. Through all of these activities and conversations it is important to be positive about language learning and communicate that you are happy for people who become bilingual. Students will share more if they know that you are interested in and supportive of their language repertoires and potential. Figure 1 highlights some of the language that might be heard in a classroom where educators share their support and interest with students.

Finding out about students' language resources:	• What other languages do you know? • Can anyone say (or write) that in another language? • What languages do you hear in your neighborhood? • What languages do people in your family speak? Can you communicate with them? • I'm so interested in learning about the languages you speak.
Reinforcing the benefits of bilingualism:	• How great that you can say that word in another language. • Your family must be proud of you for speaking more than one language. • Knowing more than one language helps you understand ideas even better and makes your brain smarter. • Being bilingual helps people get jobs because they can communicate with more people.
Guiding students to call upon all of their linguistic resources:	• Compare that word to another one that you know. • Can you think of a word in another language that means the same thing? • Is that word a cognate (word that has similar spelling and meaning across languages)? • Put on your "bilingual cap" when thinking about this question. • Use more than one language in your project today. • Now translate your writing so that a speaker of your home language could read it.

FIGURE 1: Examples of language to encourage bilingualism.

Knowing about students' linguistic resources can support teachers to tailor their instruction to what students may find most difficult. For example, Spanish speakers and others may find learning certain sounds in English, such as short *e* and short *i,* especially difficult because they do not exist in students' home languages (Helman, 2004). Instead of beginning instruction with the most difficult sounds for students, educators can focus on the commonalities or the sounds that more closely resemble sounds in a student's home language. Later, after these easy-to-distinguish contrasts have been learned, the lens can zoom in and focus more explicitly on sound contrasts that are difficult to perceive. Similarly, an emergent bilingual learning Spanish who speaks English as a home language may have difficulty identifying and producing certain sounds in Spanish, such as the rolled *r* or *ñ*. These tricky sounds can be sequenced so they follow the more basic and straightforward sound-symbol combinations of the new language. The Teacher Resource Guide for the *Words Their Way Classroom* or *Palabras a su Paso Salón de Clases de clases* programs provide suggestions in each lesson about how to support multilingual students as they learn in the new language.

Focus on Student Engagement

If you have spent time studying or engaging with others in a new language, you are likely to know the feeling of linguistic overload. It takes energy to concentrate in the language, being learned and after a period of time (a shorter span for beginners than more advanced speakers), learners need to decompress and do something active. Learner engagement should be a high priority for educators working with emergent bilingual students because it gives them the space to put their language into practice and relax a bit. Active engagement in word study is fostered in a number of ways (Helman et al., 2012). Students can get up and move as they chant or spell their word study words, act out what the words mean, or make up a rhyme or song to remember them. Having time to talk with others about the words allows students to take in their meanings and spellings more fully, including by comparing the words to others they know in their home languages. When students play word study guessing games (e.g., "I spy a word with ___.") or simple board games they will have time to come at their word learning from a different angle.

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Very importantly, students should have direct opportunities to put their new learning into action through purposeful and meaningful activities (Helman et al., 2012). Word study lessons should begin with a shared reading of a short piece of text that uses the kinds of words that will be studied that day. Following a focus on the individual words, students should have an opportunity to use the words in their own writing, find the words in a word hunt, or build sentences using words cards. While less linguistically taxing, these activities emblazon word meanings and spellings onto students' consciousness and serve as artifacts of student learning that the teacher can use to tailor instruction in the coming days.

Conclusion

Word study is more complex for students learning in a new language because they are learning the meanings of words and sentences at the same time as they are learning the ways the new language is structured in writing. For this reason, educators need to consciously tailor their instruction so that it focuses on developing vocabulary, integrating language development, building on the linguistic resources students bring to school, and ensuring student engagement. Educators can adopt a number of practices in their everyday instruction that will support emergent bilinguals to learn the code of the new language while also deriving meaning from the words they are learning. At the same time, educators are helping to create a new generation of bilingual students who know about words in more than one language.

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