

## EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

# Leveraging the Science of Reading for Emergent Bilinguals

**OBJECTIVE**

Discover how applying the science of reading through an asset-based lens empowers educational leaders to create equitable, culturally responsive literacy instruction that better serves multilingual learners and fosters academic success for all students.

**GUIDING QUESTION**

As you read, determine the key actionable strategies for implementing an asset-based approach with the science of reading to support multilingual students.

**ACTIVITY**

- Independently read the article and take notes using the guiding questions.
- With your group, share your “light bulb” moments. Discuss the following questions:
  - What’s one key takeaway or summary of the article that stood out to you?
  - What’s a new idea or approach you learned that could benefit your district?
  - What’s something you can take back and share with your teams or apply in your own context?
- Work with your group to complete a three-sentence summary of your discussion. Be sure that each team member has a copy of the summary.



EDUCATION INSIGHT

# **Leveraging the Science of Reading for Emergent Bilinguals**

**Equity in Literacy Instruction**

**Lexia<sup>®</sup>**  
ALL FOR LITERACY™

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## Introduction


As classrooms across the United States become enriched with the vibrancy of diverse languages, the emergence of bilingual and multilingual students paints a new tapestry of cultural exchange. Approximately 10% of public school students in the United States, as of recent data, are classed as English Learners (ELs), illustrating the pivotal role of language proficiency in their academic voyage (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). From California to New York, the surge of Emergent Bilingual (EB) learners is a nationwide phenomenon, symbolizing a transformative shift in our educational landscape.

The burgeoning presence of EBs introduces an enriching linguistic diversity that enlivens classrooms and society at large, albeit with accompanying educational hurdles (García & Kleifgen, 2018). This diversity encapsulates language proficiency and entails a broad range of cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences. Consequently, educators must devise differentiated teaching and learning approaches that resonate with this multifaceted student population (Gay, 2018).

Given the increasing demographic changes in U.S. classrooms, the growing need for targeted English language and literacy instruction for EB students is particularly critical. Coupled with culturally responsive teaching, this instructional approach is pivotal to promoting positive academic outcomes for EBs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Evidence suggests that when instruction is adapted to suit the linguistic needs of EB students and simultaneously acknowledges their cultural heritage, their academic engagement and performance improve significantly (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Despite the compelling need for specific pedagogical strategies for EBs, many educators face challenges in fully addressing their distinct learning needs (Gay, 2018). This signals a demand for professional development opportunities concentrating on understanding and implementing effective instructional strategies for EBs. Among these effective teaching methodologies is explicit vocabulary instruction, which is critical to aiding EB students to “make meaning” by comprehending the words they decode. This, coupled with Structured Literacy approaches and the innovative practice of *translanguaging*, provides a robust framework to support EBs’ learning journey (Kilpatrick, 2015; García, 2011). Through explicit vocabulary instruction, we ensure decoding words is coupled with meaningful understanding, enhancing the holistic literacy development of EB students.

**Defining translanguaging:**  
Using all linguistic and cognitive resources, including one’s home language, to make sense of the academic content being delivered in a language one is just starting to learn.



Professional development programs rooted in the science of reading and culturally responsive pedagogy should be in place to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the increasing diversity in their classrooms (Kilpatrick, 2015; Gay, 2018). The ultimate goal of these interventions is a transformative shift in educational practices toward fostering educational equity and full integration of cultural and linguistic diversity into the learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By doing so, classrooms become inclusive spaces that cater to all students, regardless of their language proficiency or cultural background.



## The Opportunity for Evolving Bilingual Education

Emergent Bilingual student education is a multifaceted challenge marked by stigmatization, developmental needs, cultural inclusivity, and parental involvement. The “English Learner” label, commonly affixed to these students, often conveys a deficit perspective, focusing on their linguistic limitations rather than their skills and potential (Teacher Education Reinvented [TER], 2022). An alternative lens, the asset-based approach, celebrates the capabilities and potential of EBs as multilingual learners endowed with valuable linguistic and cultural resources (Di Michele Lalor, 2020).

The asset-based perspective allows for reframing the narrative around EBs, accentuating their strengths and positioning them as capable learners (Di Michele Lalor, 2020). Instead of considering an EB student’s limited English proficiency a shortcoming, teachers should view it as a stepping stone to bilingual or multilingual mastery. For example, an EB student may struggle with English grammar but may have robust vocabulary knowledge in their home language. This knowledge is an asset to develop strategies for vocabulary learning in English.

It should be noted that while this lens encourages positive language when discussing EB students, the official terminology may still be required to access certain educational resources. Specific terminology or categories may be used when referring to English Learner (EL) students or students with limited English proficiency (LEP). These requirements are often in place to ensure equal access to educational resources and address the needs of students learning English as an additional language (New America, 2023).

One reason for using specific terminology is to comply with federal or state laws that mandate identification and support for language minority students. For example, in the United States, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the U.S. Department of Education enforces civil rights laws that protect students, including those who are English Learners. These laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, may require using certain terms or categories to identify and provide appropriate services to students who require language support (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights & U.S. Department of Justice, 2016).

Additionally, specific terminology may be used for administrative purposes, such as:



**Determining Funding Allocations:** For instance, they might categorize students as “English Learners,” “Limited English Proficient students,” or “English as a Second Language (ESL) students” based on established criteria. The allocation of resources and funding can then be based on the number of students in each category, ensuring appropriate support for language development programs (National Research Council, 2011).



**Data Collection:** Consistent terminology is vital for collecting accurate data on the performance and progress of EB students. Educational institutions may track specific language proficiency levels using terms such as “beginner,” “intermediate,” or “advanced.” This data allows administrators and educators to evaluate the effectiveness of language acquisition programs, identify areas for improvement, and tailor instructional strategies accordingly (National Research Council, 2011).



**Program Assessment:** Standardized terminology helps assess the effectiveness of language acquisition programs. Educational agencies may establish specific benchmarks or language proficiency standards that align with recognized frameworks, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) or the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards. Using consistent terminology to assess students’ language skills against these standards, educational institutions can evaluate program outcomes and make informed decisions about program modifications or improvements (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).



**Resource Allocation:** Effective resource allocation requires accurate identification and categorization of students. Consistent terminology ensures the needs of EB students are appropriately addressed. For example, suppose an institution determines certain students fall into a specific language proficiency category. In that case, they can allocate resources, such as specialized instructional materials, additional support personnel, or targeted professional development for teachers, to best meet the needs of those students (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).



Beyond academics, addressing a child's complete developmental needs is crucial. The academic success of Emergent Bilingual students is intimately linked to their social and emotional development (Nieto & Bode, 2018). Adopting holistic, student-centered teaching models that cater to cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional developmental needs is paramount (Gay, 2017). A culturally relevant curriculum and inclusive classroom environment engenders a sense of belonging, significantly influencing academic engagement and achievement for EBs and all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This might include group activities requiring collaboration and negotiation in English, encouraging linguistic development and social-emotional learning.

Humanizing EBs necessitates understanding them as unique individuals with diverse experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal strengths, including their interests and hobbies (Gay, 2017). This personalized approach supports academic success and cultivates an environment where students feel seen and appreciated. Recognizing and incorporating their interests into learning experiences can significantly enhance their engagement and motivation. By knowing student interests, teachers can use these as tools to engage students and make learning more relevant and fun for that student.

Promoting cultural inclusivity in classrooms empowers EBs to view their cultures, languages, and personal pursuits as valuable assets, thus bolstering their academic engagement and self-confidence (Viana, 2023). Culturally inclusive practices and personalized understanding of each student foster mutual respect and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds and promote holistic learning

that transcends academic skills (Nieto & Bode, 2018). In this enriched educational experience, students' interests are woven into their academic journey, amplifying their sense of belonging and contribution.

Finally, the role of parents and caretakers is exceptionally crucial in their child's education. In the case of EBs, parental engagement significantly accelerates their language acquisition and literacy development (Samson & Collins, 2012). It is pivotal to helping EB students maintain their home or heritage language. Parents and caretakers are key to preserving and cultivating this valuable linguistic and cultural heritage. Schools can encourage parents of EBs to stay involved in their child's language learning by holding parent-teacher meetings in the parent's home language or providing translation services. Also, encouraging parents to read books in their home language with their children or help with homework reinforces the student's multilingual skills.

By employing the asset-based approach, addressing developmental needs holistically, humanizing EB students through cultural inclusivity, recognizing their interests, and actively involving parents to foster home language maintenance, we can comprehensively address the multifaceted challenge of EB education. The nurturing support of parents can be a significant bridge connecting the school and home environments, further empowering EBs in their educational journey. Additionally, by emphasizing the strengths and value of language and cultural diversity, we can benefit EB students and positively impact monolingual students. This approach fosters cultural awareness and promotes an open-minded perspective among all students.

## The Role of the Science of Reading and Structured Literacy in Emergent Bilingual Education

The science of reading provides an invaluable framework for understanding the process of reading, which proves immensely beneficial for literacy instruction among Emergent Bilinguals (Lexia Learning, 2023b). By emphasizing the importance of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, the science of reading highlights critical elements in the language and literacy acquisition process, particularly for long-term English Learners (Schwartz, 2022). Instructional strategies based on the science of reading, such as Structured Literacy, show promise in improving literacy outcomes for English Learners (Carreker, 2021).

*Translanguaging* plays a central role in educating Emergent Bilinguals. It promotes cognitive flexibility, enhances comprehension, and cultivates a positive perspective toward bilingualism and multilingualism (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Furthermore, the practice of *translanguaging* aligns with the asset-based approach, as it validates and utilizes home languages as learning resources. This practice challenges the deficit language model frequently associated with the English Learner label, instead adopting an asset model that recognizes a student as a proficient multilingual learner (García & Kleifgen, 2018).

In language acquisition, the relationship between decoding and comprehension holds paramount significance. Decoding refers to using knowledge of letter-sound relationships to accurately pronounce written words, marking a vital step in language acquisition (Schwartz, 2022). Mastery in decoding enables students to devote their cognitive resources to understanding the meaning of the text, thus enhancing comprehension (Veguilla et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding the relationship between decoding and comprehension can help educators develop effective instructional practices to support literacy growth among Emergent Bilinguals (Veguilla et al., 2023).



## Reimagining Emergent Bilingual Education: Strategies and Solutions

A fundamental aspect of reimagining Emergent Bilingual education is using asset-based language and a culture of respect in creating a conducive educational environment. The asset-based approach emphasizes Emergent Bilingual students' strengths, abilities, and potential, fostering a more affirming learning environment (Di Michele Lalor, 2020). By honoring and respecting students' diverse cultural backgrounds, a sense of belonging, engagement, and motivation is nurtured within them (Viana, 2023). An educational milieu that values all languages and cultures helps dismantle deficit language, promoting equity and inclusivity for English Learners (Lexia Learning, 2023a).

Cultural equity and culturally responsive pedagogical practices have significantly improved academic outcomes. Cultural equity in education entails acknowledging and honoring the cultural diversity of students and integrating these elements into the curriculum (Gay, 2017). Furthermore, culturally responsive pedagogy aligns with the asset-based approach by using teaching methods and materials that respect and connect to a student's cultural experiences and linking new concepts to their lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Research indicates that such practices bolster academic outcomes by enhancing student engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging in the educational environment (Gay, 2017). This finding is particularly pertinent when considering long-term English Learners (LTELs) or students

who have been in U.S. schools for an extended period of time, typically for six or more years, but have not yet attained proficiency in English. These students often face unique challenges as they navigate the academic curriculum while simultaneously learning English as an additional language. LTELs may have varying levels of English language proficiency and can come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Educators and schools often implement specific strategies and interventions to support LTELs in their language development and academic progress.

Professional learning that combines culturally responsive pedagogy with the science of reading-based instruction holds great promise in effectively addressing the unique needs of Emergent Bilinguals (Lexia Learning, 2022b). This educational approach equips teachers with the knowledge and skills to support language and literacy development while appreciating students' cultural and linguistic resources (Carreker, 2021). By deepening teachers' understanding of the science of reading and culturally responsive practices, professional learning promotes educational equity for English Learners (Carreker, 2021). Such an approach facilitates the growth of multilingual learners, acknowledging and reinforcing the strengths and potential these students contribute to the classroom.

## Real-World Applications and Actionable Strategies

Enacting culturally responsive pedagogy coupled with the science of reading-backed instructional practices necessitates strategic implementation. A teacher might start each academic year with a “Language Map” project. Students can create a visual representation of the languages they speak, use, or are connected to in some way, recognizing their language diversity as a strength and an asset. This would encourage a culture of respect and appreciation for the diverse languages and cultures in the classroom, establishing a positive, affirming learning environment from the start. Furthermore, teachers promoting educational equity might ensure all instructional materials are accessible to English Learners. This could include providing translations, visual aids, or glossaries to support understanding.

Along with explicit, systematic instruction in key areas such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, teachers could also use strategies like differentiated instruction, offering different ways for students to demonstrate their understanding, which caters to the diverse linguistic abilities in the classroom (Gay, 2017). This approach particularly benefits Emergent Bilinguals and multilingual learners in their language and literacy development journey.

Moreover, translanguaging strategies, such as permitting students to employ their home language during specific activities, can be seamlessly integrated into the science of reading-based instruction to enhance comprehension and engagement (García, 2011; Guilamo, 2021). These strategies align with the asset-based approach by affirming and leveraging student linguistic resources and fostering an inclusive learning environment. Professional development programs that offer training in culturally responsive pedagogy and the science of reading can equip teachers with the necessary strategies and resources for effective instruction (Samson & Collins, 2012).

Another essential strategy is ensuring the texts used in class reflect the diversity of the classroom population. Regularly reviewing and selecting texts representing diverse student backgrounds can create a more inclusive learning environment for Emergent Bilinguals (Gay, 2017). A teacher who has undergone professional development in this area might incorporate diverse texts regarding culture, language, and representation, helping students see themselves and their experiences reflected in what they read. Incorporating these texts into the curriculum can make learning more relatable and engaging for students, promoting literacy development and cultural understanding (Nieto & Bode, 2018). School and district leaders can support teachers in this effort by providing resources and training about selecting and using diverse texts effectively (Lexia Learning, 2022b).

Additionally, teachers must be prepared for potential challenges, such as confusion or misunderstanding, by using thoughtful pedagogical strategies to navigate these issues (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Finally, providing constructive feedback and reinforcement to students navigating multiple languages is essential for building confidence and competence (Samson & Collins, 2012).

## Closing Thoughts

The pressing need for an asset-based instructional approach is a linchpin for bolstering educational equity for Emergent Bilinguals. This approach acts as a catalyst in recognizing Emergent Bilingual students' latent strengths and capacities, promoting a shift away from a narrow deficit perspective. When united with the science of reading, this approach creates a robust educational framework responsive to the distinctive learning needs of Emergent Bilinguals and English Learners (Kilpatrick, 2015). The intersection of these strategies nurtures a conducive learning environment and encourages effective literacy instruction, leading to improved academic outcomes (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Such practices carry significant potential for systemic and enduring transformation within education. Embracing an asset-based approach and science of reading-based instruction can drive a substantial shift in how we educate Emergent Bilinguals and English Learners (Gay, 2018). Furthermore, these strategies can potentially elevate student academic achievement and English proficiency, influencing their educational trajectory (National et al., 2000; García & Kleifgen, 2018). This is especially crucial for long-term English Learners who may continue to wrestle with language proficiency, despite extended periods in school.

The necessity to act is paramount. We can transform our approach to educating Emergent Bilingual students, fostering inclusivity and equity in education. This is more than an opportunity; it is our mission.



## Lexia Solutions

Lexia provides a range of products specifically designed to offer continuous assistance in developing literacy skills. Lexia® English Language Development®, Lexia LETRS®, and Lexia Aspire™ Professional Learning offer teachers targeted, individualized instruction to enhance foundational reading skills and English proficiency in Emergent Bilinguals (Lexia Learning, 2022b). Lexia English directly supports Emergent Bilingual students, while LETRS and Aspire focus on professional learning, arming all teachers with vital knowledge, skills, and strategies as they support their EB students.

These programs have long been grounded in the principles of the science of reading, encompassing systematic instruction in essential literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Kilpatrick, 2015; Lexia Learning, 2022b).

Lexia's products integrate research-based strategies for supporting English Learners, offering scaffolding, explicit vocabulary instruction, and opportunities for oral language practice (García, 2011; Guilamo, 2021).

An asset-based approach is fundamental to Lexia's programs, recognizing the potential of Emergent Bilingual students and utilizing their linguistic and cultural resources for learning (Di Michele Lalor, 2020).



[Lexia® English Language Development®](#) celebrates Emergent Bilingual and multilingual learners through academic conversations with integrated speaking, listening, and grammar practice. Explicit instruction in all areas of language development helps K–6 students acquire speaking and listening skills that support word recognition and reading comprehension.



[Lexia LETRS®](#) (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) Professional Learning Suite is comprehensive professional learning designed to provide early childhood and elementary educators and administrators with deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading.



[Lexia Aspire™ Professional Learning](#) This digital, flexible, and self-paced solution empowers upper-elementary and middle school educators with knowledge and skills in applying the science of reading to accelerate students' literacy skills.

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