Integrating Research-Based Indicators of Emergent Biliteracy Teaching Practices for Emerging Bilingual Learners

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This research explored how bilingual teachers of young Dual Language Leaners ages 0-3 integrated Reyes and Azuara's (2008) Ecological Model of Emergent Biliteracy in their classrooms to foster bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic success. Dual Language Learners are the fastest-growing population of young children in the country that speak a language other than English. As so, the early childhood workforce must integrate the Ecological Model of Emergent Biliteracy for emergent biliteracy development and equitable emergent biliteracy teaching practices to support the natural biliteracy development of young Spanish-English Dual Language Learners. Qualitative data was collected through interviews and observations and were analyzed using the grounded theory stages of coding. The findings recommend immersing Dual Language Learners in equitable learning opportunities that incorporate their cultural knowledge, languages, experiences, and learning to support the precursors for emerging biliteracy development.

Keywords: emergent bilinguals, Dual Language Learners, biliteracy, bilingual, inclusive, ecological model, equitable practices, emerging biliteracy

INTRODUCTION

About one in five school-age children in the United States speak a language other than English at home, and roughly half of these children are emerging bilinguals or Dual Language Learner (DLLs) when they enter school (McNamara, 2016). Effectively educating children learning English as their second language is a national challenge with consequences for individuals and society. Despite their potential and the assets they bring to the classroom, many children struggle to meet the requirements for academic achievement. A sizeable gap in educational achievement and attainment exists between DLLs and their monolingual English peers. To specify, I define emergent bilinguals as young children ages 3 to 5 who speak a native language other than English and are in a constantly changing process of developing bilingual and biliterate competencies in their first and second language. Biliteracy is children's competencies in two written languages through simultaneous or sequentially acquisition methods (Reyes, 2006). Emergent biliteracy is also the "ongoing, dynamic development of concepts and expertise for thinking, listening, speaking, reading and writing in two languages" (Reyes, 2006, p. 269). Garcia and Wei (2014) reiterated that DLLs' bilingualism is dynamic as they develop their native and second language simultaneously or sequentially by developing their native language first and then their second language.

Emergent bilinguals are the fastest-growing population of young children in the country who speak a language other than English at home (McNamara, 2016). These high demographics call for culturally and linguistically appropriate learning environments and instruction that address bilingual and biliteracy
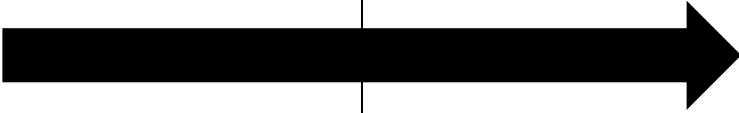
concepts of fundamental skills and knowledge needed as the prerequisites for formal biliteracy and bilingual acquisition for young DLLs. Ensuring that emergent bilinguals encounter opportunities to reach their full potential in formal and informal educational settings is the goal for educators through responsive pedagogies and research-based evidence-based practices in collaboration with families. To close the achievement gap and promote academic excellence for emergent bilinguals developing biliteracy proficiency in Spanish and English, I implemented qualitative research to determine what emergent biliteracy practices teachers used to develop emergent biliteracy in Spanish and English three-year-olds. I followed Reyes and Azuara's (2008) Ecological Model as my theoretical framework to identify research-based emergent biliteracy teaching practices that foster emergent biliteracy development. Below, I summarize the qualitative research design and results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ecological Model for emergent biliteracy development (Reyes, 2006) supports the developmentally appropriate core consideration of commonality by immersing emerging bilingual students in social interactions, within cultural contexts, with adults and peers, creating meaningful and authentic biliteracy contexts using both languages and integrating precursor literacy activities of phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabet knowledge, oral language development and writing development in their classrooms. These components collaborate to provide high-quality emergent biliteracy development in a classroom of emerging bilingual children. The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) presented the early skills and abilities necessary as precursors for conventional literacy skills (e.g., decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing, and spelling). The panel identified 11 variables representing precursor literacy skills that had large to moderate predictive relationships with later measures of literacy development and those skills included: 1) alphabet knowledge; 2) phonological awareness; 3) rapid automatic naming of letters or digit; 4) rapid automatic naming of objects or colors; 5) writing or writing name; 6) phonological memory; 7) concepts about print; 8) print knowledge; 9) reading readiness; 10) oral language; and 11) visual processing (NELP, 2008). Each component is predictive of later literacy achievement for both preschool and kindergarten children. Although the panel also suggested that additional studies in this area are needed with younger and bilingual children, they provide valuable information on what precursor literacy skills are necessary for later literacy achievement and what types of interventions and supports assist in developing those skills for emergent bilinguals. Reyes and Azuara's (2008) research findings correlated with several of these precursors for emerging biliteracy development, such as concepts of print, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, oral language, and writing development.

Table 1 displays the components of the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy that support the biliteracy process as part of the natural development of young Spanish-English emergent bilinguals. Reyes (2006) identified adults, competent peers, and family members as interlocutors and as the most significant influences that support and determine children's emergent biliteracy because of their guidance in higher levels of understanding about written symbols and print in their environment. This makes up the first component of the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy to expand emergent bilinguals' Zone of Proximal Development as they transact with two overlapping and interacting literature worlds (Moll & Dworin, 1996; Reyes, 2006). The scaffolding of more competent peers, adults or family members helps young bilingual children to advance his or her language and literacy development and independent thinking in two languages (Reyes, 2006). Therefore, emergent bilinguals need to be active and emerge in social interaction, dialogue, and participation in everyday literacy activities with others to develop their emerging biliteracy.

TABLE 1
THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR EMERGENT BILITERACY

Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy (Reyes & Azuara, 2008)		
Immerse emergent bilinguals in social interactions	Create meaningful and authentic biliteracy contexts	Literacy activities that develop biliteracy are: -Phonological awareness -Concepts of print -Alphabet knowledge -Oral language development -Writing development

Source: Reyes and Azuara, 2008, p. 374–398.

Besides integrating an interactive biliterate world in the classrooms, teachers must integrate multiple experiences, exposures, and natural interactions to develop biliteracy during experiences embedded in meaningful contexts. These meaningful contexts involve access to written texts and various literacy activities in both languages. Children are more likely to maintain their bilingualism and biliteracy when they draw on various learning activities and social purposes at home and in school with opportunities to hear and use both languages in oral and written forms (Reyes, Kenner, Moll & Orellana, 2012). An additive context promises to provide an optimal environment by validating, using, and seeing children's native language as a resource. Reyes et al., (2006) recommended using both languages at the same comparable status in the classroom to ensure children are developing concepts and expertise for thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing in two languages. Creating meaningful and authentic biliteracy contexts makes up the second component of the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy (Reyes, 2006). Meaningful contexts help emergent bilinguals construct, organize, and understand print, while also connecting it with their personal experiences within specific contexts and social experiences (Reyes, 2006).

The third component of the Reyes' et al., (2008) Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy is integrating literacy activities that develop the precursors of print; phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabet knowledge, oral language, and writing. This model considers not only the 'what' children learn but also 'how' they learn their native and second language simultaneously. This model encourages teachers to focus on how various environments and interactions among participants, contexts, and sociocultural forces shape children's biliteracy development. Teachers need to expose children to meaningful reasons and precursor activities to use print and symbols to develop biliteracy knowledge as a natural process in their daily activities. Teachers also need to be knowledgeable about emergent biliteracy, both as a process and as part of developing competencies as opposed to just "outcomes," to understand what it means to develop biliteracy and the advantages of doing so to support the natural process of becoming biliterate (Duran, 2018; Reyes, 2006; Reyes et al., 2008; Reyes et al., 2012).

METHODOLOGY

My study integrated a qualitative descriptive single case study research design to collect, analyze and determine teachers' emergent biliteracy practices to develop emergent biliteracy for Spanish and English three-year-olds. The setting of the study was at an Early Head Start Program serving 284 infants and toddlers from low-income Spanish speaking Hispanic and Latino origin families in South Texas. Three bilingual teachers participated in the study with classrooms of eight children following the simultaneous language development model. My researcher's role was to collect data through observations of teachers during their instruction and facilitate the interviews with the teachers. The data sources were observations and interviews with the teachers of and about the emergent biliteracy teaching practices implemented with their emergent English and Spanish bilingual 3-year-old students. I used data reduction, constant

comparison analysis, grounded theory stages of coding, and statistical analysis techniques to analyze the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed the teachers relied on the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy to implement various emergent biliteracy teaching practices with their three-year-old emergent bilinguals. The observations and interviews documented an increased student engagement that facilitated language and literacy learning in English and Spanish for emergent bilingual students. Table 2 shows the emergent biliteracy teaching practices teachers integrated with their students in English and Spanish through social interactions between teachers, students, and peer-to-peer. Teachers also provided opportunities for emergent bilinguals to use emerging languages in different genres and for different functions while speaking, thinking, writing, and reading embedded in meaningful contexts (Reyes et al., 2008). The observations showed three major indicators; language interaction, biliteracy learning and developmental writing with specific teaching practices that were child-initiated and teacher-planned experiences to immerse children in emerging biliteracy experiences.

The research findings support integrating Reyes & Azuara's (2008) Ecological Model of Emergent Biliteracy to help teachers provide effective instruction related to the precursors for emerging biliteracy development such as concepts of print, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, oral language and writing in both languages. Together, these emergent biliteracy components support the biliteracy process as part of the natural development of young Spanish-English emergent bilinguals. Teachers in the research knew the pedagogical knowledge needed to best educate emerging bilingual learners, but also used the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy components to guide their instruction (Reyes et al., 2008).

The first component of the Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy is immersing emergent bilinguals in social interactions (Reyes et al., 2008). Each teacher received specialized training and coaching regarding each precursor (i.e., phonological awareness or developmental writing) and was guided to implement it through sociocultural contexts and social interactions to facilitate oral competence and literacy learning. The process of children's emergent biliteracy development is facilitated when children are provided with opportunities to use both emerging languages in different genres and for different functions while speaking, thinking, writing, and reading (Reyes et al., 2008).

Teachers integrated meaningful contexts for students by providing them with various biliteracy events and learning environments in the classroom. As a result, students were highly engaged as they interacted with their peers and teachers. This engagement and social interactions with peers and adults enhanced their language and biliteracy development (Reyes et al., 2008). Teachers immersed students in social interactions and biliteracy activities that motivated them to be active and participate in a dialogue with others to develop their emerging biliteracy skills of speaking, reading, and writing. This suggests integrating instructional practices that immerse emergent bilinguals in sociocultural contexts and social interaction to enhance their emerging biliteracy development.

TABLE 2
EMERGENT BILITERACY TEACHING PRACTICES

Language Interactions in Spanish and English
Frequent conversations with back-and-forth exchanges
Constant peer conversations
Ask open-ended questions
Extend wait time for students to respond
Repetition
Self-and Parallel Talk
Encourage code-switching during conversations
Biliteracy Learning in Spanish and English
Use songs, stories, games, finger play and rhymes to play with language
Read to individual children and to a small group of children 2-3 times daily
Associate reading with pleasure
Point to the pictures in a book and label parts of a book
Use facial expressions and varied vocal tones and gestures
Connect words with children's real-life experiences at home
Introduce new vocabulary
Writing in Spanish and English
Draw attention to writing
Point out print in the environment
Offer experiences with writing and drawing tools

Source: Cuevas Guerra, 2020.

The Ecological Model for Emergent Biliteracy's second component is creating meaningful and authentic biliteracy contexts (Reyes et al., 2008). Reyes & Azuara's (2008) research suggested a high level of participation of students in various biliteracy events (i.e., story time, writing, talking…) to help them develop biliteracy. Teachers in the research created a variety of biliteracy contexts and events that exposed students to natural interactions concerning their selected precursors (i.e., phonological awareness and writing). Each teacher is involved in a variety of written, auditory, and biliteracy activities in both languages. Students had access to and opportunities to hear and use both languages in oral and written forms, thus giving them skills and tools to draw on for various learning activities and social purposes during their teacher's emergent biliteracy practice.

These aspects of meaningful contexts, immersion in social interaction and dialogue, while also respecting and using the student's native language, help emergent bilinguals construct, organize, and analyze the meaning of print and connect it with personal experiences. As Reyes & Azuara (2008) reinforced, the Ecological of Emergent Biliteracy Model in early childhood considers not only the 'what' children learn but also 'how' they learn their native and second language simultaneously. This model encouraged teachers to focus on how various environments and interactions among participants, contexts, and sociocultural forces shape children's biliteracy development (Reyes et al., 2008). Teachers in this study used it to expose their emergent bilinguals to phonological awareness and developmental writing. They noticed a higher level of student engagement, thus validating that when students are given meaningful reasons to use print and symbols, they develop biliteracy knowledge as a natural process that is part of their culture and home language (Moll & Dworin, 1996; Reyes et al., 2008).

The research shows using Reyes & Azuara's (2008) Ecological of Emergent Biliteracy Model increases student engagement. As so, teachers need to integrate it to develop and facilitate language and literacy learning in both languages for emergent bilingual students. Each component of the model must be used accurately to ensure students are immersed in meaningful and authentic biliteracy contexts and activities through a variety of social interactions to help develop the precursors of biliteracy. It is also imperative to provide biliteracy events that require children to actively participate during interactive play and learning with peers and adults to develop emergent biliteracy skills. Similarly, Reyes et al. (2008) emphasized that "children's biliteracy development is highly situated and is influenced, mediated, and transformed in particular ways during peer and adult interactions" (p. 392). It is crucial to use both languages equally to develop a student's biliteracy skills at the fullest social and academic potential. Lastly, teachers need continual professional development and coaching to support students to become proficient in both languages.

CONCLUSION

This research supports teachers in fostering the natural process of first and second language acquisition of emerging bilingual children by using the Ecological Model of Emergent Biliteracy and the emergent biliteracy teaching practices to facilitate biliteracy development. This fosters the biliteracy process as part of the natural development of young Spanish-English emergent bilinguals that build upon their cultural identity and linguistic strengths to support their path towards bilingualism, biliteracy, and academic success. These practices are equitable because they are alternatives to traditional perspectives aimed at white monolingual children. Instead, these recommendations are made by teachers of color who are too often silenced voices due to their minoritized status as Hispanic and English Language Learners. The NAEYC Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education's (2021) position statement empowers the early childhood workforce to advocate for social justice for all children by providing developmentally and linguistically appropriate, culturally relevant, responsive, and equitable sustaining experiences and interactions in curriculum and instruction (Ardrey & Hall, 2021). The Ecological Model of Emergent Biliteracy and emergent biliteracy practices (see Tables 1 & 2) ensures DLL's have equitable learning opportunities that incorporate their cultural knowledge, languages, experiences, and communication styles within equitable sociocultural interactions (Alanís, Arreguín, Salinas-González, 2021; Alanis, Iruka, & Friedman, 2021).

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