# Chapter 12

# Writing With Emergent Bilingual Students:
## Lessons From a Kindergarten Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this chapter is to provide teachers with an understanding of who emergent bilingual students are and how they can adapt their practices in order to use students' home language as a resource rather than as a deficit. The chapter will share findings from a study conducted with emergent bilingual students in a kindergarten writing workshop. It will also focus on how teachers can adopt an additive approach to language that expands children's linguistic, social, and cultural resources while supporting learning a new language as well and literacy development.*

## INTRODUCTION

There are over four million students who are classified as English Language Learners in the United States and they account for 14.1 percent of public-school students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). Linguistic diversity in children that attend public school is the highest than it has ever been (Hopkins, 2016). However, most of these students attend schools with restrictive language policies that do not allow them to use their native language as a resource for learning (Gándara, 2000; Garcia & Curry-Rodriguez, 2000; Linton, 2007). Many emergent bilinguals (García, 2005, 2009) are placed in mainstream classrooms where they are faced with learning a new language and simultaneously learning to read and write in English. These students often receive limited support through educational programs such as English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pullout or structured immersion programs, but many bilingual students who demonstrate oral proficiency are often excited from these programs under the assumption that the students have full command of the English language due to speak conversational English (Grant & Wong, 2003).

A key factor that impacts the educational achievement of bilingual students are the teachers that facilitate instruction. Teachers have a significant influence on the academic achievement of students. Darling-Hammond (2000) has identified the following general qualities of effective teachers: strong intelligence and verbal abilities, strong content knowledge, knowledge on how to develop higher order thinking, understanding of learning development, teacher experience, and adaptive expertise that allows the teacher to make decisions based on students' needs. Darling-Hammond (2000) concludes that there is a "strong, significant relationship of teacher quality variables to student achievement" (p. 23). This analysis also concludes that student characteristics, such as poverty or the label of being an English Learner, are negatively correlated to the qualifications of teachers. In addition, it is important to note that the growing diversity of students is not reflected in the teacher demographics. Emergent bilinguals are being educated by a teaching force of predominantly White, monolingual, and female (Boser, 2011). During the 2007-2008 school year, eighty-three percent of full-time teachers were White, 7 percent were Black, 7 percent were Hispanic, and 1 percent were Asian (Aud et al., 2012). In comparison, the number of students from diverse backgrounds continues to grow in U.S. schools. Additionally, teachers must understand that emergent bilinguals are in themselves not a monolithic group. The educational needs of these students vary depending on the context. The challenge is for teachers to find ways to meet the academic needs of students while understanding the diversity that exists under the umbrella of emergent bilingual (Menken & Solorza, 2015). This chapter seeks to provide new understandings for teachers working with emergent bilingual students.

## BACKGROUND

The labels that are imposed on students are important and impact the way that students are viewed. Many emergent bilingual students continue to be labeled with identifiers that mark them as deficient or lacking through the use of terms such as *Limited English Proficient* or *English Language Learner* (Gort & Bauer, 2012; Reyes, 2006). These terms position students as lacking, instead of recognizing their linguistic competencies as they learn to read and write. The term most commonly used, English Language Learner, "devalues other languages and puts the English in a sole position of legitimacy" (Garcia, Klefgen, & Falchi, 2008, p. 7). For this reason, I adopt the suggested term *emergent bilingual* (Garcia 2009; 2010; García et al., 2008; Gort & Bauer, 2012; Reyes, 2006). The term emergent bilingual is utilized in this study to refer to "young children who speak a native language other than English and are in the dynamic process of developing bilingual and biliterate competencies, with the support of their communities" (Reyes, 2006). The use of this term is a departure from labeling and viewing this group of students from a deficit lens and only in relation to English. The term views their bilingualism as an asset rather than a deficiency and positions this group of students as having potential instead of seeing them as deficient because they speak a different language. Additionally, the use of the term emerging refers to the idea that students are continually learning language (García et al., 2008). In essence, this term validates the students' home language and thus affirms their identity as language users.

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