Basics of Working with Emergent Multilingual / Emergent Bilingual Students

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Introduction

This article is intended as an introduction to best practices for working with "Emergent Multilingual / Emergent Bilingual" students. Many teacher preparation programs, it seems, do not include very much — certainly not enough — training on working with these students, who are more commonly known as "English Learners". Every year, I present these practices to the teachers who are new to the schools I work at. I use this reading as a start, and every now and again update it with new advice (such as AI this year).

We start with "Sheltered Instruction" (SI) because it covers the most common best practices for working with EMEB students. The graphic on page 2 shows the elements of Sheltered Instruction. They include many elements that are considered best practices for all students, and add several that are especially important when working with EMEB students.

EMEB students may not have all the skills and experiences they need to master the content area material. Obviously, their English level can be an issue, but so too can their background knowledge and EMEB: refers to "Emergent Multilingual / Emergent Bilingual" students. Also often known as "English Language Learners" (ELLs) or "English Learners" (ELs). But, "EMEB" focuses more on the students' bi- / multi-lingualism and not the fact that they are learning English.

familiarity with academic environments and topics. To support their students, teachers explicitly teach the language and other skills that the students need, while also ensuring that the content material and **presentation** is *accessible* to the students.

Next, we will pre-teach some vocabulary, then we will look at how teachers can apply the individual SI elements in their classes.

pre-teach vocab: this is one of the SI-elements.

Pacing Learning strategies Scaffolding Content objectives Grouping strategies
Vocabulary review Feedback Meaningful activities

Supplementary materials Higher-order thinking skills Review and assessment

Sufficient wait-time

Explicit language objectives

Explicitly pre-teach key vocabulary

Adapted content and assignments

Use of L1 (native language)

Teacher speech modified for students' ability Massive use of supplementary materials

ESOL Vocabulary

Below are some of the important terms / jargon that will help readers make sense of this article and the ESOL field in general.

EMEB stands for "Emergent Multilingual / Emergent Bilingual". As the margin note said, this is my preferred term, the more common term is "English Learner" (EL), and "Multilingual Learner" (MLL) is becoming more widely used as well. I prefer to attach "emergent"

Figure 1: Based on and modified from Figure 3.1 (page 45) in Echevarria and Graves' "Sheltered Content Instruction", Pearson, 2011, 4th edition.

Not alphabetical because I put the more common & more important nearer the top of the list.

because it allows us to distinguish between learners who are still receiving ESOL (see below) services and those who are not — that is, the students who have placed out of services (the multilingual or bilingual students)

ESOL stands for "English for Speakers of Other Languages". Although widely used in the professional TESOL community ("Teachers of / Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages"), in the USA ESL ("English as a Second Language") was widely used. However, because many students who are learning English already have 2 or 3 or 4 or more languages, "second" language is often not very accurate. Thus, the slow change to using ESOL.

L1 stands for "Language 1"; "the first language"; or "the native language". It is convenient, even though some students may have a first language that they use at home and a second language that they used in school before coming to the USA. The important thing is just that we are talking about another language the student might have, not English.

Cognates: Cognates are very, very useful, but we shouldn't assume that just because a word is a cognate that the students will automagically understand it. If the student never took physical science in Spanish, they are probably not going to know "gravedad" that much better than they know "gravity".

Cognitive Load: I love this phrase because it very accurately describes why learning content in a new language is so difficult. Every word or grammar item the student is not "fluent" with, the more brain power they have to use to try to understand the content. It is literally "how much of a load are we putting on the student's brain?"

When possible, we try to schedule newcomers for high-load classes in the morning, and less cognitively demanding classes in the afternoon. Students will just be much fresher and able to handle the cognitive load in the morning. So, newcomers might have English 2nd period, and art 7th.

Best Practices of Sheltered Instruction

Sufficient wait-time

Supposedly, teachers wait, on average, around three seconds for a response from a student. EMEB students can need at least that much time just to decode the question, much less come up with an answer

placed out: or who never needed services — some students come to USA schools already fully bilingual or multilingual.

I am not saying that Art or P.E. are not demanding courses, but usually students in art class are not doing as much, or as demanding, reading as they are in English or Social Studies.

3 seconds: the exact number is not important. The fact is that most teachers do not wait long enough.

and then frame that answer in appropriate English. Ten seconds is a much more effective amount of time to wait. If this seems excessive in class because students become restless or the EMEB student seems to feel pressure, teachers can pre-teach "filler" language for students to use. Examples include: "I am thinking", "I don't understand", "One moment please", "Could you come back to me?", or even a simple "pass". In addition, mainstream and more advanced EMEB students could use rephrasing / confirmation of the question such as "You are asking [question content], right?".

With less confident or less experienced students, teachers can give the questions ahead of time, so that the student has time to think and come up with a response. For newcomers, this may involve a minute or so of typing into a translation website.

Explicit language objectives

Teachers should explicitly teach students the language they need to successfully acquire the content. While a content class will usually have some higher-level academic language objectives (writing lab reports or five-paragraph essays, expressing complicated ideas concerning a topic, etc.) teachers of EMEB students will also include whatever language areas the students need to successfully complete the lesson. Language objectives will also include commonly used — in the content area — phrases or grammar structures, such as "according to"; "not only, ... but also"; parallelism (for example, -ing, -ing, and -ing); and so on.

Language objectives can be especially important in classes with end-ofterm state testing, as often the language objectives will include Tier 2 vocabulary that is important for success on those tests. For students with more school experience "back home" or in their L1, developing the objectives and vocabulary in their L1 in addition to English can be very useful.

Language objectives should be explicitly discussed in class. Many monolingual students will also benefit from explicit instruction on language targets, at least some of the time.

Explicitly pre-teach key vocabulary

Vocabulary instruction is an important part of any content area class. When working with EMEB students, key vocabulary should be explicitly taught — before covering the associated content. Identify key terms that are essential for understanding the lesson — this

websites: in general, newcomers should be allowed to use technology for translation during class, even if other students are forbidden (such as may be the case with phones).

Ask yourself, "what words / phrases / grammar do students need to successfully complete the assignment?" Then, teach that.

Tier 2 vocabulary is the general academic words that students will use in most of their classes. Words such as "analyze" and "discuss" are tier 2 words.

I like to say teachers should be relentless when teaching vocabulary. Use it a lot; make sure students notice you are using it; and make sure they are using it.

may include some vocabulary for directions or outcomes (that is, vocabulary for language objectives). Teach these terms before getting into the main lesson. Visuals, realia, gestures (if appropriate), as well as vocabulary cards, Frayer models, and sites such as Quizlet are great ways to introduce and practice vocabulary. Seeing and using the words in context is very important as well.

Because students' English language skills are often a barrier to understanding the vocabulary, merely defining or looking the word up in a dictionary are often not useful ways to help EMEB students acquire the target vocabulary. As mentioned above, realia are always useful, as is using the vocabulary in realistic contexts. Native language (L1) dictionaries or discourse can also be helpful.

We have to balance the need for students to immediately access the content with the need for them to also develop their English. Even for newcomers, we should avoid just translating everything. L1 use and support is important, but so is English development.

Adapted content & assignments

High-school-level readings may be too difficult for some EMEB students. The problem is two-fold. First is the language itself, and second is the time it takes the student to read and comprehend that reading. Adapting content to the EMEB students' level is imperative for language acquisition and thus content acquisition. However, it is also imperative that students be exposed to rich language. Too rich, though, and they may waste time and effort for little gain. Finding the right balance for each student is important, and something the ESOL Coordinator can help with.

Time is a significant factor for EMEB students. School and homework aside, many have to work as interpreters for their parents or extended families. Many work, to help support their families, or they take care of their siblings. They do not always have the extra few hours they might need to slog through a complex reading that is, for them, i + 8.

An easy way to adapt a text quickly is to highlight the most important sections — with less to read, students have more time to work through each section. Obviously, this assumes that the reading is at or near the student's reading level. Aside from being fast and easy to do, another advantage is that it exposes the EMEB student to the same language as the other students.

Another option is to help build background knowledge by providing a simplified reading first, then the original reading, perhaps lightly modified.

I also like to use word scrambles, word searches, and crossword puzzles when introducing new vocab, to encourage thinking about the letters and the spelling — word "awareness", if you will.

In the past, I would create or modify short readings for the students, to help with vocabulary acquisition. Now, I use "AI" to generate vocabulary lists and readings. See section AI on page 8 for more about this.

Newcomers: please don't just translate everything for them. They do need to learn English.

I'm not sure if i + 1 is still a thing, but the further from a student's reading level, the more time a reading is going to take them. The law of diminishing returns does apply here.

Highlight the most important passages.

Reduce the linguistic load of a reading by simplifying the grammar and replacing unneccessarily difficult words. The content should not change or be "watered down".

Another option (there are still many, many more options) is an "enhanced" reading. These take more time to make, but are exceptionally helpful to students. Enhanced readings include graphics, margin notes, and perhaps links to external aids (such as Youtube videos in the student's L1).

Modified assignments and assessments are important because without them, the teacher may not have an accurate idea of the student's actual level of content understanding.

Common modifications for assessments include:

- rewording the questions to ensure students can correctly and quickly understand them
- reducing the number of questions with less to read, students do not need to rush; they may also need less (or no) extra time
- reducing the number of answer choices again, less to read
- use word banks, sentence frames / sentence starters, other organizing indications

ALL EMEB students should always be allowed extra time and a dictionary, should they require either. They do not have to use them, but these two accommodations should always be offered. Small group testing is also a common, and helpful, accommodation.

EMEB students can also be given entirely different ways of showing their comprehension of the content material. Newcomers and others with very little English could, for example, record their answers in their native language, either in writing (if they can) or verbally.

Use of L1 (native language)

In general, students should always be allowed to use their native language (L1) during group / pair work. EMEB students should not always be grouped together, but they should be allowed to discuss content in their L1, if that works better for them. Understanding content in L1 will help students quickly and accurately acquire the content in English.

Teachers sometimes worry about not being able to understand the students. They worry that the students are discussing their weekend plans, or worse, maybe making fun of the teacher. If you are worried, checking in and redirecting just as you would English monolingual groups is often the best strategy.

L1 means the student's native or primary language.

Did the student fail the test because they didn't know the content, or because they couldn't understand the test? If assignments and readings are too difficult, you won't know for sure what happened.

Rewording: Avoid the passive voice

Organizational indications: for example, "Q2: Explain three reasons ..."; answer space includes

First ____; Second ____; Third ____.

Recording: I can help teachers with this, and with grading such assessments.

Speaking out of turn (and thus interrupting or otherwise disrupting the class) is an issue regardless of the language spoken. The issue isn't that the student used Spanish (for example); the issue is the fact that the student is talking when they shouldn't. Address it as such. This is not a language equity issue, it is a classroom management / student behavior issue.

Note that not every EMEB will want to use L1 for accessing content. The choice is *entirely up to the student*. Also, that choice may change based on the topic and the group members. That is totally normal and okay.

Use of L1: the student chooses. Never required to use L1.

Teacher speech modified for students' ability

Modifying teacher speech includes not only level-appropriate vocabulary and grammar, but also avoiding the use of idioms and references to pop culture. Teachers need to understand that EMEB students may not have the same knowledge of the culture as mainstream students do. Most mainstream USA Americans would not understand references to Beowulf or the Tale of Genji, so do not expect EMEB students to understand references to Big Brother, Harry Potter, or Red Lobster.

Please note that slowing down your speech can be very helpful for EMEB students, but talking louder is almost never appropriate. Assuming the student was able to hear the English correctly the first time, louder will never help with comprehension. Slower might help.

Long-term EMEB may not have any problem with most common idioms and very common cultural references. Newer arrivals may have difficulties with both.

Red Lobster — true story! Louder: does NOT help.

Rephrasing can help, but be sure to try the original English at least a second time. Only rephrase if two or three repetitions have not helped.

Massive use of supplementary materials

Use as many forms of materials as possible to present and discuss content. Graphic organizers, realia, pictures, videos, vocabulary cards, etc. are all more helpful than simply assigning a reading and then talking about it. As much as possible, try to relate the content and the supplementary materials to things the students already know about or understand.

For content-area content, Youtube videos in the student's L1 can be very helpful. To find these videos, put your search terms into Google Translate, then search in Youtube with the resulting translation. Check a few of the videos and recommend the ones that seem best.

Word walls and vocabulary (flash) cards are also very helpful, when used properly. Be relentless about reviewing vocabulary. Don't just focus on definitions — use the words in context; discuss them; translate them; find (or have students find) synonyms and antonyms when BUT: Talking about content is also very helpful for EMEB students.

meaningful; draw pictures if someone in class can. You can also have students make Frayer model sheets. Even word searches, scrambled words, and crossword puzzles can help students remember vocabulary words.

AI

I use "AI" here to refer to any of the recent (as of 2023) sites that use "Large Language Models" (LLMs) to create almost anything a teacher might need. As of fall 2023, there are literally dozens of sites that are about a year or so old that will create lesson plans, assessments, rubrics, slides, readings, worksheets, emails, etc. There are also sites (but perhaps fewer) that will create images for teachers, based on text prompts or stick-figure-level "drawings".

There are ethical considerations to using AI. Those must be weighed against teachers' responsibility to do their best for their students. For teachers of EMEB students, especially, the ability to almost instantly create readings in several languages at several levels, along with vocabulary lists and comprehension questions, is practically a superpower we only dreamed of until now. I used to spend a few hours a week modifying readings to match students' needs. Now, it is more like a few minutes.

Even though AI can automagically create these resources for us, we must still proofread them and check them for suitability for our students. Generated readings often come out stilted, boring, or not exactly (or not even close to) what we need. A lot depends on the prompts the teacher gives to the AI. I think "prompt creation" is going to be some interesting new PD coming to school districts soon.

Translation is a great feature of the current AIs. You can ask Chat-GPT, for example, to create a reading:

- using [this] vocabulary and [that] grammar;
- at [whatever] grade level;
- in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Japanese (with pronunciation guides for the kanji).

Ask for vocabulary lists for the reading with definitions, example sentences, antonyms, and synomyms in all of the needed languages, and you just did more differentiation in 5 minutes than most teachers could do in a week, previously. AI-supported differentiation is especially helpful when you have newcomers in your classroom.

LLMs: ChatGPT is possibly the best known LLM, but there are several others from huge corporations, as well as many smaller ones. I use "AI" here to avoid preferencing ChatGPT.

Working With Newcomers

Having a newcomer in a "gen ed" content area class is challenging for everyone. If you haven't experienced being in a new culture or new language that you are not used to, your imagination will only get you so far. Yes, it is stressful. Yes, many students will make relatively quick progress with speaking and listening. Yes, some students will make progress in all four domains just through exposure. But, exposure only is not best practice and certainly not fast enough. Further, students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) may not make progress (especially in reading and writing) just through exposure.

Yes, having newcomers is stressful for the teacher too. Teachers want to do their best for their students, and it can be very hard to do that for newcomers when the day still only has 24 hours. Additionally, teachers can worry that if they spend too long trying to bring the newcomers into the conversation, the mainstream students may not be getting as good an education as they deserve. It can seem an unfair balancing act.

That said, this is not a new problem, and there are a multitude of strategies and tactics that work. First, here are some basic understandings that teachers should have about newcomers.

Quiet period: Most newcomers will go through a quiet period where they will listen but not speak. This is normal and should not be rushed. I've had outgoing, adventurous newcomers who try English in class after only a few weeks. I've had "newcomers" who are still shy about speaking even in their second year in USA schools.

Background Variety: Some newcomers have years of quality formal

education back home. Others' formal education may have ended years before they came to the USA. Depending on the family and the culture, one group may have had more formal education and one group from the same family or culture may have had less. Some newcomers may have studied English back home, and if their home language is similar to English, they may already be quite skilled with English. Others may never have studied English. If their home language is not similar to English (like many American indigenous languages or most East Asian languages), then English

Google Translate: It is almost hard to remember what we did for newcomers before online translation tools. Today, teachers can have conversations with students in the student's L1 without knowing

is going to be a bit more of a struggle.

more / less: for example, cultures where boys may get more education than girls

the language themselves. Teachers can also use Google Translate or similar tools to translate their slides, worksheets, and assessments.

Newcomers can "talk" in class by typing into a web site (or speaking in their native language) and letting the website speak in English for them. Personally, I suspect using translation apps and web sites may slow down language acquisition for some students. However, there is no denying that translation tools have greatly increased the opportunities for newcomer students to master academic content.

More Strategies for EMEB Students

Below are some more strategies. These are not specific to newcomers, and are often helpful for many students beyond just the EMEB students.

SWIRL

SWIRL stands for Speaking, Writing, Interaction, Reading, Listening. Basically, have those five in every lesson.

[need more]

Use Visual Aids and Graphic Organizers

Incorporate images, videos, diagrams, charts, and other visual materials into lessons. Use graphic organizers to structure information. Visual aids can bridge the language gap by providing context and making abstract concepts more concrete. Graphic organizers help students organize and process information, making it easier to understand and remember.

AI image generators can be very helpful — you can get a simple picture of just what you need, with a minimum of extraneous content. A possible bonus is that, because AI-generated images cannot be copyrighted, there is no concern about permission to use or distribute.

Simplified Language, Clear Instructions, "Decluttered" Materials

The advice here is related to the Sheltered Instruction best practices of adapted content and modified teacher speech, but is a bit more general. Basically, avoid jargon or complex vocabulary when simpler copyright: if you make changes to the image, then copyright might attach. I think courts are still figuring this out.

alternatives exist. Give step-by-step instructions both verbally and in writing.

I often tell teachers, ask yourself what is your goal for class today, or for this specific activity? Is the goal to develop English or is it to acquire content? In the long run, of course, it is both. But what is it right now, in class today, with this activity?

If the goal is to acquire content, then, in my opinion, IT IS OKAY to present that content with grade-school-level English (but, as mentioned above, not watered down). The easier the English, the more brain power the students can use to understand the concepts.

For example, the text below (from Wikipedia [need citation]) is written at roughly a level for college graduates. That is, people educated in English who have finished college.

In atomic physics, the Bohr model or Rutherford-Bohr model of the atom, presented by Niels Bohr and Ernest Rutherford in 1913, consists of a small, dense nucleus surrounded by orbiting electrons. It is analogous to the structure of the Solar System, but with attraction provided by electrostatic force rather than gravity, and with the electron energies quantized (assuming only discrete values).

Why is this reading so difficult? Long sentences and "big" words. It is two sentences with an average of 30 words each. The average length of each word is 5 characters. That may not sound bad, but that is the average. The longest, "electrostatic" is 13 letters.

Here is that same passage again, rewritten to be more friendly.

Niels Bohr and Ernest Rutherford presented the Bohr model of the atom in 1913. It is also called the Rutherford-Bohr model. In the Bohr model, the atom has a small, dense nucleus. Electrons orbit around the nucleus. A good analogy is the Solar System, where the planets orbit the Sun. A difference is that gravity is not a factor in the electrons orbits. Instead, the electrostatic force keeps the electrons in orbit around the nucleus. Also, unlike planets, electrons can only be in certain orbits.

This passage is actually a little longer. It has 84 words; the original had 60. Instead of 2 very long sentences, it has 7 with an average of 12 words each. Notice many of the important vocabulary words are still there — people's names, present, atom, nucleus, electrons, present, analogy, and of course, "electrostatic force". If our standards don't require that last, then I would get rid of it, and probably a few related sentences.

in writing: this is very important. Students need to be able not just to follow the directions, but to clearly understand when you are giving directions, for example.

present: a good tier 2 word!

The reading level? Around 9th grade. Still not "simple" but much closer to understandable. If we needed to, we could get it down a few more grade levels by breaking a few of the longer sentences into two or three shorter ones.

Note also that the modified reading does not have any other scaffolds. If you were doing this on a presentation slide, or on a Google Doc, for example, you would want to color code some words, highlight some phrases, add some margin notes with meanings or L1 translations, etc. Add some of those scaffolds, and your "simplified" reading is on its way to becoming an "enhanced" or "engineered" reading.

Frequent Checks for Understanding

Ensuring that EMEB students are following along accurately helps identify and address misunderstandings immediately. Just as you would when working with mainstream students, pause to check students' understanding — but do it more frequently and more in depth when you have EMEBs, especially newcomers. Quick checks can be quick questions, thumbs up / thumbs down, or other quick-response methods. I like to use "fist to five" to see how students are feeling about their understanding of the content.

Of course, you have to be careful because it is not uncommon for EMEB students with less English to think they understand, but in reality have misunderstood something. That is where more in depth questions come in. If a student is not able to answer (because of not knowing, not English level), I will often ask several other people the same question, and then come back to the person who was not able to answer.

I often introduce this at the start of the term by questioning students about class rules or requirements. For example,

Teacher: "Abdi, what should you bring to every class?"

Abdi: "The reading book."

Teacher: "Yes. Correct. Good answer."

Teacher: "Maria, what should you bring to every class?"

Maria: "The reading book."

Teacher: "Yes. Correct. Good answer."

Teacher: "Aisha, what should you bring to every class?"

Aisha: "The reading book."

Or, just let AI do that for you.

"enhanced reading": enhanced (or "engineered" – same thing) is a good thing.

Teacher: "Yes. Correct. Good answer."

Teacher: "Christian, what should you bring to every class?"

Christian: "The reading book."

Teacher: "Yes. Correct. Good answer."

I might even finish by going back to ask Abdi again. Usually, by the time I ask the 4th or 5th student, many of them are rolling their eyes. That's fine because when I use this when asking about content, they will already be familiar. The student who could not answer the first time will likely not feel called out when I go back to them.

For more in-depth checking, open-ended questions are better than yes / no questions, and more detail is better. This is more of a general teaching tip, but it is especially important and valuable with EMEB students.

For example, "do you understand?" and "do you have any questions?" can be less helpful than "what questions do you have?" or "what questions do you have about [the topic]?" Some teachers recommend questions more like "what topic can I help you with?" I think that sounds like a great idea, but I've not tried it yet myself.

Finally, because interaction is so important, I like to have pairs or groups review the content themselves for a few minutes. They can go over their notes, handouts, or a couple of pages in a textbook, checking to be sure they all understand. Then, the teacher can address any remaining questions.

Provide Extra Time and Resources

We touched on this already, but it worth repeating — allow EMEB students extra time for assignments and tests. Allow them to use glossaries or bilingual dictionaries. Many will not want the dictionaries because, as we talked about, they never learned about "gravity" in Spanish anyway. That is fine, as long as the resources are offered.

Extra time reduces the stress of trying to process information in a new language. If students have extra time, the teacher may not need to reduce the linguistic load of the assignment or assessment as much. Or, if extra time is not practical — such as when students are doing final exams and have early release (a half day of school) — extra effort should be made to reduce the linguistic load of the test, so students don't need to spend as much time parsing each question and answer, for example.

Small groups are important, if only because sometimes students will avoid using dictionaries in the mainstream classroom, where the other students, who do not get dictionaries, can see them. Also, sometimes the teacher will have to explain a word or a question to an EMEB student, and that might be distracting in the regular classroom.

About The Author

My name is Chris Spackman. I am an ESOL teacher / coordinator in Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A. I taught EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in Japan for many years.

I have been working in education since 1995, when I went to Japan as an ALT on the JET Program(me). I came back to the U.S.A. in 2008, earned my MA TESOL from ODU, and a K-12 teaching license from the state of Ohio, and began working as an ESOL teacher.

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About This Document

I long believed that I found an early version of this document online and modified it for use at my schools. However, extensive internet searches do not turn up any document similar to any parts of this one. Further, I recently went back into my archives and found a very short, very simple version of this document from 2013. I updated it every couple of years with more details, resulting in this current, Fall 2023, version.

I now suspect that I may not have based my first versions directly on someone else's original work. Or, if it was, that document was only a page long and my current version totally different from the original. So, I've changed the author from "modified by Chris Spackman" to "by Chris Spackman".

That said, if someone does recognize parts of this as someone else's work, please let me know so that I can give credit.

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ESOL: English to Speakers of Other Languages

ALT: Assistant Language Teacher. JET Program: The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program.

ODU: Ohio Dominican University.

