Introduction

> There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education.
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> —*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974

This introductory chapter:

- Discusses the labels used for students who are not yet proficient in English and advocates for using the term *emergent bilingual*,
- Gives reasons why thinking of students as emergent bilinguals can result in a more equitable education for these students, and
- Provides an overview of the book.

EMERGENT BILINGUALS

One of the most misunderstood issues in prekindergarten to 12th-grade education today is how to educate students who are not deemed proficient in English. These students are often called English language learners (ELLs) or, as in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), simply English learners (ELs). Before 2015, the federal government referred to these students as limited English proficient (LEP). The designation refers to students who speak a language other than English and are acquiring English in school. Although local and state education agencies may use different definitions (see Chapter 2), the official definition in ESSA is of students "ages 3–21, enrolled in elementary or secondary education, born outside of the United States or speaking a language other than English in their homes, and not having sufficient mastery of English to *meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom*" (Title III, Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], as cited in National Research Council, 2011, p. 5; emphasis added). NCLB, which is the previous U.S. federal law enacted in January 2002 that reauthorized the ESEA of 1965, had described these students as those "whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual the ability to meet the *State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments*" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, Sec. 9101[37]; emphasis added).

Although the change is subtle and holds the same meaning, it is indicative of the greater emphasis in ESSA on meeting academic standards in English rather than simply doing well on state standardized tests.

Students classified as ELLs were 10.4% of the total school population of the United States during school year 2019–2020, accounting for 5,115,887 students (Office of English Language Acquisition [OELA], 2022). Despite their staggering presence, these students lag in reading and math, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and their median graduation rate in four years of 69% pales in comparison with the 87% national average (OELA, 2023; U.S. DoE, 2022d). And yet, as we will see, these students also have great linguistic, cultural, and intellectual/academic strengths that are being ignored in schools. Part of how we perceive these students has to do with how we name them, which we discuss in the next section.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Referring to these students as ELLs or ELs—as many school district officials and educators presently do—signals the omission of a critical idea in the discussion of equitable education for these students.

English learners are, in fact, *emergent bilinguals.*[1] That is, through school and through acquiring English, these students become *bilingual,* able to continue to function with their home language practices[2] as well as in English—the new language practices that they acquire in school. The home language practices are a significant educational resource for these students as they develop their English for academic purposes. Moreover, their home language practices are an essential resource for their sense of connection, understanding of the world, and overall well-being. When officials and educators ignore the bilingualism that these students can and must develop through schooling in the United States, they perpetuate inequities in the education of these students. That is, they discount the linguistic and cultural practices and understandings of these students and assume that their educational needs are the same as those of a monolingual child. Or they assume that these students are inferior and need a remedial English language, skills-based education, thus robbing them of meaningful academic content and of ways to use their entire language repertoire to make meaning. Therefore, in our definition of emergent bilinguals, we include those who may be perceived as proficient in their home language but not in English, as well as students who have been developing English alongside another language from an early age and whose linguistic repertoire involves features of both languages, which they may use at home and in school depending on their audience.

There is little agreement about what name best describes these students. In addition to the terms LEP, ELL, and EL, students who are acquiring English in the nation's schools are also variously referred to in the literature as *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD), students with *English language communication barriers* (ELCB), *English as a second language* (ESL) students, *English as a new language* (ENL) students, *language minority* (LM), *language minoritized, dual-language learner* (DLL), *bilingual/multilingual learner,* or *racialized bilinguals.* Each label has different connotations, and all have limitations.

Critics of the LEP label used formerly by the federal government argued convincingly that it focuses on the students' limitations rather than their potential. State and local educational authorities most often prefer the term ELL or EL because these are protected legal labels. That is, once students are given this label, their English learning needs are recognized, and funds are allotted to their education. But the ELL/EL label has serious limitations: It devalues other languages and puts the English language in a sole position of legitimacy. It also focuses solely on the development of what is often referred to as "academic English," ignoring other parts of students' language and education.

The terms *CLD* and *LM students* can include culturally and linguistically different minority students who are already bilingual, although the LM label may better offer a legal basis for rights and accommodations (May, 2011). The recent use of the term *language minoritized* (used without abbreviation in critical scholarship of bilingualism) points to the power of language-majority groups over those they deem inferior, and it resists a categorization of "minority." Critical scholars who work on language and race often refer to these children as *racialized bilinguals.*

ESL or *ENL* refers to a subject and not to people; also, this label of *ESL/ENL student* does not recognize students for whom English is not a "second" language but one spoken fluently at home or those for whom English is a third, fourth, or even fifth language and beyond. Furthermore, to tell students that they are learners or speakers of English as a second language robs them of the opportunity to appropriate "English" features as part of their very own linguistic repertoire.

Since 2010, the term *DLL* has gained much currency. This has to do first and foremost with the silencing of the term *bilingual* in the United States since the late 1990s (for more on this history, see especially Crawford, 2007; see also Chapter 3, this volume). It also has to do with the rise of what in the United States are increasingly called dual-language programs, bilingual programs that typically teach language-majority and language-minoritized students together. But referring to these students as dual-language learners constructs them as having two discrete language systems that have to be developed separately, when in fact, as we will see later, bilinguals develop one complex linguistic system that they use regularly to learn.

Recently, the term *dual-language learner* has been increasingly used to refer to young learners, under 8 years of age, who are learning English in school while continuing to develop basic proficiency in their home language (Williams, 2015). The Dual Language Learners National Work Group, a group dedicated to raising awareness about very young bilingual learners, reserves the term *English language learner* for those who are older than 8 and who are said to have basic proficiency in their home language (Williams, 2015). But many children entering early childhood educational settings and preschools today are simultaneous bilinguals (see Escamilla et al., 2014), being raised in bilingual and multilingual homes and in communities where more than one language is spoken and heard. Although we applaud the efforts of early childhood educators to bring attention to the capacities of very young

emergent bilinguals, we take exception with the unequivocal adoption of the term *DLL* for very young children. The way in which the DLL label has been constructed around very young children leaves out the recognition of the complex bilingualism of those who grow up bilingual from birth and who also need development and expansion of their entire language repertoire, and not just "dual" languages as if they were two autonomous entities.

The terms *bilingual/multilingual learner* or *multilingual learner* have many advantages over the *English learner* label. Identifying students as bilingual/multilingual learners does not focus on the needs of these students to learn English. Instead, it celebrates these students for their bilingual/multilingual capacities.

We prefer, and use here, the term *emergent bilingual* because it has become obvious to us that much educational inequity is derived from obfuscating the fact that a meaningful education will not only turn these English learners into English proficient students, but more significantly, into bilingual and multilingual students and adults. *Emergent bilingual* most accurately indexes the type of student who is the object of our attention—those whose bilingualism is emerging and who have been minoritized and racialized in schools. By choosing to refer to these students as emergent bilinguals, we want to stress and amplify the term *bilingualism*, as well as emphasize the concept of *emergence*. In affirming the term *bilingual*, we recognize the early political struggles over bilingual education that were tied to antiracism, better housing and jobs, and more voting rights. For us, *bilingual* refers not simply to the addition of a second language. This term points to political struggles over inclusion and equality for minoritized students with different language practices. It also includes the many minoritized students who speak what are considered more than two languages, that is, those who some people refer to as multilingual. The concept of *emergence* for us is related to that of the Chilean biologist Francisco Varela (1995), who argues:

> Forget the idea of a black box with inputs and outputs. Think in terms of loops. . . . The inputs and outputs are completely dependent on interactions within the system, and their richness comes from their internal connectedness. Give up the boxes, and work with the entire loopiness of the thing. (n.p.)

As we will see, this concept of emergence fits our own vision of how bilingualism emerges, not by focusing on "bits and pieces" of languages, as Guadalupe Valdés would say (2001, p. 13), but on the "loopiness" of language development, on the dynamic practices.

Thinking of these students as emergent bilinguals has important consequences not only for them but also for teachers, policymakers, parents, the language education profession, and U.S. society at large (García, 2009b). The use of the term *emergent bilinguals* allows us to imagine a different scenario. Instead of being regarded as limited in some way or as mere learners of English, as the terms *limited English proficient* or *English language learner/English learner* suggest, students are seen instead for their potential to become bilingual or multilingual. Their emergent

bilingualism begins to be recognized as a cognitive, social, and educational resource to be leveraged, which is consistent with research on this topic (see Chapter 4).

For teachers, working with these students as emergent bilinguals means holding higher expectations of them rather than simply remediating their limitations and focusing on their English learning. In recognizing the emergent bilingualism of students, educators are building on their strengths—their linguistic and cultural practices. They are thereby making positive use of the students' home language and bilingual practices rather than suppressing or ignoring them.

In recognizing these students as emergent bilinguals, policymakers can begin to require a more rigorous curriculum and more challenging instructional material for them and recognize that language development takes time and happens through meaningful interactions. Educational policymakers become more patient, understanding that—as research has clearly shown—living and learning as bilingual takes time (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). And it becomes easier to demand that assessment be valid for *all* bilinguals. A more flexible norm can then be adopted that includes all students along a bilingual continuum instead of insisting on a rigid monolingual standard.

As we said before, the term *emergent bilingual* recognizes the fact that our linguistic performances are always emerging, depending on the languaging task that we are asked to perform. By focusing on emergence, we heed Varela's call to work with the entire loopiness of language, a complex network of significance. Our linguistic performances are never done, completed, finished, or isolated from our other parts of being. Teachers of emergent bilingual students are thus challenged to provide rich affordances (cultural, historical, social) that will encourage students to want to use language to perform academic tasks for a particular audience.

Giving emergent bilinguals a name that does not focus on their limitations means that their family and community's lived language practices are seen as an educational resource. Instead of assigning blame to parents and community for language practices that may not include English, the school can begin to see the parents and community as the experts in the students' linguistic and cultural practices, which are the basis of all learning. As a result, family and community members will be able to participate in the education of their children from a position of strength, not a position of limitations.

The language education profession is presently compartmentalized in ways that do not support the holistic education of students. Focusing on students' emergent bilingualism/multilingualism can facilitate the integration of four approaches to language education that presently exist separately in the United States—the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), bilingual education (BE), the teaching of the heritage language (HL), and the teaching of a foreign language (FL). As a result of a more unifying focus, teaching begins to be centered on *the students* rather than on a profession or on a curriculum.

Finally, we know that bilingual practices in the 21st century are more important than ever, and thus important for U.S. society. It is clear that having flexible language practices, being able to do language in ways described by many scholars as

translanguaging (García, 2009a; see also García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015; see also Chapter 4, this volume), can become an important resource for all in the future. The linguistic resources of the United States have never been greater. Despite the insistence on being identified as a monolingual nation-state, the United States has perhaps the world's most complex language practices, given its long history of immigration. The benefits of harnessing the lived multilingualism of Americans are more evident than ever.

THIS BOOK

The central idea that we present in this book is that there is a growing dissonance between *research* on the education of minoritized emergent bilinguals, *policy* enacted to educate them, and the *practices* we observe in communities and schools. Whereas research has consistently shown the importance of building on students' complex home language practices as they develop ways of using English, whether in ESL instruction or bilingual education,[3] U.S. educational policy has often ignored these research findings. In fact, in recent years in the United States—as we explain subsequently—educational policy toward minoritized emergent bilinguals has become more rigid, embodying a view of these students solely from a deficit perspective and demanding that English alone be used in their education. It is interesting to note, however, that language-majority families, as well as second- and third-generation bilingual families, have had a growing interest in developing their children's bilingual abilities, accounting for the growth of immersion programs in languages other than English (often called dual-language immersion), the increase of two-way dual-language bilingual education programs where language-majority students participate, and the development of dual-language bilingual programs where bilingual children who are positioned differently along a bilingual and social continuum are educated together. These last programs are often called one-way dual-language or developmental bilingual programs because most students are considered to be of one ethnolinguistic group. But because of the students' different national identities and various historical and generational immigration experiences, students perceived as being of one language group engage in linguistic and cultural practices that are quite heterogeneous. This book focuses on emergent bilingual students who because of race, poverty, immigration status, and English language proficiency are subjected to an impoverished education that contradicts research on language acquisition, bilingualism, and learning in general.

Educators, who are closer to the ground than many policymakers and researchers, are often caught in the middle of the dissonance between research, policy, and the immediacy of having to educate emergent bilinguals. As a result, educators' teaching practices sometimes suffer as they strive to find alternative ways of acting on top-down national and local educational policies that are plainly misguided for the education of these students. This frequent incompatibility between research, policy, and teaching practice is responsible for much of the miseducation of emergent bilinguals in the United States and their failure in school.

Chapter 2 in this book characterizes the students who are the subject of our attention: emergent bilinguals. We raise questions regarding the ways in which demographic data on these students are collected at state and national levels and used to identify them for educational purposes. Chapter 3 briefly historicizes the educational policies targeted toward this group of students and reviews the programs and practices that have been developed over the past 50 years. We then turn to Chapter 4, where we consider theoretical constructs, empirical evidence, and practices related to what we think are the five most important aspects of the education of emergent bilinguals—language and literacy considerations (Chapter 5), curriculum and pedagogy (Chapter 6), family and community engagement (Chapter 7), assessment (Chapter 8), and digital technologies and learning (Chapter 9). The objective of these chapters is to expose the educational inequities that directly affect the education of emergent bilinguals and to provide descriptions of alternative practices that alleviate these injustices. Most of the inequities stem from policymakers' and often educators' lack of understanding of bilingualism/multilingualism itself. Thus, we will discuss how misunderstandings about the nature of bilingualism have educational equity consequences for some of the most disadvantaged students. Finally, Chapter 10 offers recommendations for advocates, policymakers, educators, and researchers.

Study Questions

1. Discuss some of the issues that emerge from the different labels that have been assigned to students who are developing English proficiency in schools.
2. What are the reasons why García, Kleifgen, and Cervantes-Soon name these students emergent bilinguals? Discuss how using this term affects students, teachers, policymakers, parents, the language education profession, and U.S. society.
3. What is the central idea in this book?