

Topic Brief: **Building on Emergent Multilingual Learners' Language Practices in Pre-School and Kindergarten Programs**

Introduction

The increased number of young children with home or primary languages other than English in the United States has brought rich linguistic and cultural diversity to pre-school programs across the country. These prekindergarten-aged children, whom New York State refers to as *Emergent Multilingual Learners* (EMLLs), are not only developing English skills but also becoming multilingual and multiliterate. As findings continue to emphasize the importance of fortifying the home language in early childhood classrooms (Escobar, 2013; Tazi, 2014; García, 2018), scholars have begun to challenge deficit perspectives of young EMLLs and to embrace culturally sustaining pedagogies that center students' linguistic competence (Paris & Alim, 2017). Despite this shift, the majority of educators within early childhood programs are not prepared to leverage children's emerging bilingualism to enhance learning (Morell, 2017).

This Topic Brief serves as a guide for all educators and school leaders of pre-school and Kindergarten programs who wish to adapt their classroom practices so that Emergent Multilingual Learners' home languages are preserved and their cultural and linguistic identities are more explicitly invited, valued, and leveraged in the early childhood setting. Because early childhood classrooms are often rich in linguistic diversity, teachers must be prepared to embrace and build from multilingual students' full emergent linguistic repertoire (García & Otheguy, 2016), while maintaining strong partnerships with families.

This brief also speaks directly to Prekindergarten educators who seek to value their students' multilingualism by creating space within their classroom for bilingual *languageing*, bilingual literacy, and bilingual play. To this end, we organize this brief around several essential questions:

1. What should teachers understand about the language practices of emergent multilingual learners?
2. How can teachers nurture and extend emergent multilingual learners languageing?
3. How can teachers partner with bilingual parents and families in meaningful ways?
4. How can early childhood educators enhance emergent literacy and play-based classroom practices in ways that integrate and build on emergent multilingual learners' dynamic bilingualism?

We begin by explaining the natural languageing practices of emergent multilingual learners, then highlight ways that current classroom practices can build on and extend students' emergent bilingual language practices. We briefly explore existing literature in these important areas and

emphasize practical take-aways for educators. We then move into examples of promising classroom-based practices that illustrate how early childhood teachers can shift their practices to build on students' and families' language practices. These examples draw on real schools, teachers, and students and provide models of successful teaching and powerful learning.

Key Terms and Concepts

Emergent Multilingual Learners	These prekindergarten-aged children who are not only developing English skills but also becoming multilingual and multiliterate.
Languaging (verb)	This term reflects the fluid nature of language and highlights the agency that multilingual speakers have in using their linguistic resources to communicate.
Play-Based Instruction	Acknowledges play as the basis for early childhood learning, through which teachers can guide and model social interactions, exploration of concepts, and relationship building (Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, Moore and Boyd, 2017).

What should teachers understand about emergent multilingual learners' language practices?

All children are born with the instinct to make meaning and contact. That is why infants make “cooing” sounds as they smile and make eye contact. This early languaging continues to develop as infants begin to babble. It is at this stage that parents and caretakers start recognizing sounds as attempts to say “words.” As the child grows, caretakers expect those initial sounds to develop into words that make up what we refer to as English, Spanish, Chinese, or any other “named language” (Otheguy et al., 2015, 2018). Infants being socialized in multilingual contexts hear various languages from family and caretakers, as well as from music, online games, and television. And when unmonitored by external authorities (unlike, for example, in schools), bilingual families use their full language repertoire. This bilingual practice is the norm in all multilingual communities.

EMLLs' languaging is always multimodal, for they language in ways that go beyond what adults may consider “language”. That is, rather than “named languages”, EMLLs have language *features* that they deploy freely. For example, in bilingual Latino families in the U.S., a 14-month-old's words might be “agua,” “duckie,” “milk,” “guagua,” “bus,” “choo-choo,” “vroom-vroom.” As they grow, they begin to communicate these ideas differently. A three-year-old bilingual child who states, “I didn't proba la sopita” (*I didn't taste the soup*), for example, has yet to acquire the sociocultural knowledge of what is one named language and what is another. He has been highly successful using all of his linguistic and meaning-making resources, not yet understanding the ways in which his way of languaging is often perceived as deficient. His words, accompanied by other meaning-making resources, such as gestures, pulling, crying, and

onomatopoeic words, are meaningful and must be validated by those with whom he interacts, including his teachers (Souto-Manning, 2016).

Teachers must understand that EMLs' language practices are richer than those typically allowed in schools. Particularly, classrooms that focus on learning isolated academic skills (i.e., letter sounds, etc.) restrict the instances in which children can language in organic ways. Instead of talking about "word gaps" (García & Otheguy, 2016; also see Box 1), teachers must make an effort to focus on meaning—using language to play, ask and answer questions, tell a story, express feelings, and solve problems. It is from this *position of strength*, rather than what is missing, that teachers can design ways of validating and extending EMLs' languaging.

Box 1: The Fallacy of a "Language Gap" Among Language-Minoritized Children

The idea of a "language gap" has been repeated so often that many believe it to be true. This "gap" describes the alleged disparity in vocabulary that students from different socioeconomic groups enter school with. The reality is that Emergent Multilingual Learners bring with them a diverse and rich pool of languaging practices and ways of making meaning that the school often does not recognize. Because language has been regimented to exclude the language of minoritized communities of color as valid, students' bilingualism and bidialectism is stigmatized and seen as impoverished (García & Otheguy, 2016).

The "language gap" is underscored by harmful beliefs that the languages and cultures of children and families of color are deficient and inferior to the norms of middle-class monolingual Americans (Avineri et al., 2015). This discourse of inferiority is taken up by educators and thus shapes attitudes and actions in most classrooms, where teachers attempt to match the practices of dominant language practices. This has detrimental consequences for minoritized children. Teachers must recognize that the "gap" is actually located in social and academic practices rather than in minoritized students and their families (García & Otheguy, 2016).

How can teachers nurture and extend emergent multilingual learners' languaging?

All young children enter schools with a linguistic repertoire that despite functioning efficiently at home, needs to be extended to meet the expectations of the school. The same is true for EMLs. It is important to remember that every child's language repertoire is complete for the interactions they have successfully had in a home, but not complete for the interactions that they will have outside of the home, especially in school.

The task of teachers, then, is to observe and listen to children. Teachers should observe their gestures, movements, as well as how and when children interact with each other. Figure 1 is an example of an observation protocol that can guide teachers in learning about the child's verbal and non-verbal language practices while moving away from focusing on the *absence* of language. Only then can teachers leverage EMLs' home languages while simultaneously preserving and developing them.

Teachers and parents must cultivate pride in how EMLs use language, while also exposing them to how monolingual people and societies use one language or the other, so that they can start hearing and identifying what features are best suited for communication in various contexts. To do this, teachers must validate the words children are entering school with, without believing that an utterance in one language is a more sophisticated expression of an idea. For example, if a student says, “I love my osito”, a teacher can acknowledge that the student is reflecting their experiences, rather than believing that the student lacks the word *teddy bear*. Teachers must *never* take on a deficit “semi-lingual” (Cummins, 1994) perspective of students, believing that a child has neither English nor the language. Language development is dynamic, as [the CUNY-NYSIEB vision statement](#) explains (García, 2009). To language—to draw, to dance, to sing, to play, to read, to write—is to use signs to make meaning with others in authentic ways. All teachers must recognize that EMLs possess a full and rich language repertoire, but many have yet to develop the linguistic features of experiences outside of the home, or the sociocultural understandings of how to use some features and not others.

Figure 1. A Child Language Observation Protocol for observing the language practices of EMLs.

CUNY-NYSIEB – Child Language Observation Protocol		
<u>Actions/Content of the conversation</u> What are the children doing? Who are they talking to?	<u>Child’s Talk</u> Document everything the child says.	<u>Non-verbal Language</u> How are bodies/facial expressions/objects/ gestures used to communicate?
<i>They are rolling the playdough and humming to themselves.</i>	<i>María: It’s softer. Johnny: Sí María:</i>	Describe how students use any of the following to communicate: Gestures: Facial expressions: Whole body movements: Objects:
<u>Reflect on Children’s Language Practices:</u> How is the child’s disposition as she/he engages in play? How is the child’s disposition as she/he communicates with others? What is the reason they use language or interact with others? Do they want to... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To ask for things? ● To make friends? ● To build something together? ● Pretend play scenarios? Describe how the child communicates (with children, adults) through words. Describe how the child communicates (with children, adults) through non-verbal language. How does the student use LOTE and English? What mentions of community/family are evident? How can you build on students’ mentions of community/family? What questions do you have?		

Key Points

All children's language repertoires are rich and complete for the interactions they have successfully had in a bilingual home, but not always for the interactions that they will have outside of the home, and especially in school.

How can teachers partner with bilingual parents and families in meaningful ways?

Early childhood education cannot take place without parents and families. However, when teachers hold a narrow view of what parental partnership entails, the important role of parents who speak languages other than English is reduced. Taking a value-oriented perspective towards EMLLs means viewing families' cultural and home language practices as an educational asset in the classroom (Velasco & Fialais, 2016). Teachers must understand that due to further cultural and linguistic contrasts, the distance between school and home is usually wider for EMLLs. For example, this difference is evident in schools that expect a child to be inquisitive, while the family expects compliance. Teachers must partner with families to help each other understand the cultural and linguistic values and practices of the home and the school and then collaborate to support the child's overall development.

Maintaining strong links between bilingual learning in school and bilingual learning at home requires a clear understanding of each child's cultural and linguistic background (Morell & Aponte, 2016). This means that teachers should spend time talking to parents, learning about their social histories, their interactions, and their language/literacy use. This collaboration needs to be regular and ongoing throughout the year. Through this extended learning on the part of the teacher, a plan can be devised as to how parents can support their children's learning, based on the parents' strengths and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992).

Early childhood teachers must *partner* with families in their child's education, not just *involve* them. This means that parents should be part of key decision-making regarding the education of EMLLs. Parents should be engaged as capable educators and school leaders; teachers must recognize them for their broad understandings of language, culture, and history that go beyond the narrow curriculum prescribed in schools (Kabuto & Velasco, 2016). This could mean, for example, that parents teach students and other families how to make tamales, weave mats, tattoo henna designs, count to ten in Mandarin, and sing a traditional Arabic song. Sending audio and video recordings, planning with the teacher over the phone, and adding languages to classroom labels, are some ways that parents who cannot be physically present can contribute to children's learning from afar. As teachers feel supported by the community of parents who offer their expertise and know-how, all of the children benefit from the diverse adults forming a circle of care and learning around them.

Key Points

When the cultural and linguistic practices of Emergent Multilingual Learners are not reflected in the classroom, the distance between home and school seems especially wide.

Educators must move beyond parental *involvement* and instead build and maintain strong *partnerships* with families.

How can early childhood educators enhance emergent literacy and play-based classroom practices in ways that integrate and build on students' emergent multilingualism?

Play provides the foundation for children's lifelong learning and it should be central to *all* early childhood classrooms, including Kindergarten. Educators of EMLs, however, must also recognize that play is an opportunity to observe, welcome, and build on students' emergent multilingualism. During play, children language freely as they feel safe to use their entire multimodal repertoire to express familiar themes and explore new ideas (Edwards et al., 2017). Efforts to extend EMLs' languaging must be linked to this natural inclination to interact with the world through talk (Gort, 2012). As children play, teachers must show interests their diverse language practices and create spaces for they bilingual imaginations to flourish.

Similarly, EMLs should be encouraged to engage in emergent literacy activities bilingually. Singing, drawing, and even book-related pretend play (Welsch, 2008) are rich methods of encouraging students to expand their linguistic repertoire. EMLs should be encouraged to play *beyond* the text in inventive ways that expand the story's elements and reflect their dynamic multilingual worlds. As EMLs develop emergent literacy skills, it is important that teachers maintain their bilingual language development at the forefront. Thoughtful selection of culturally and linguistically sustaining books gives students the opportunity to connect to literature and engage their bilingual imaginations (Callow, 2017). Adding book-related and culturally-relevant props to play areas also promotes multilingual interpretations of texts. Families should assist in selecting pretend foods, dress-up clothing, and playthings that encourage students' cultural and linguistic diversity to shine as they engage in reenactments, portray characters, and even refer to multilingual books during their play.

How Can Pre-Kindergarten Educators Validate and Build on the Language Practices of Emergent Multilingual Learners?

In this next section of the Topic Brief, we take you into several early childhood programs in New York City where the ideas previously put forth are brought to life. In each vignette, you will see examples of classroom practices that welcome and build on students' emergent multilingualism.

Schoolwide Practice: Professional Development and Collaborative Planning

We must first emphasize that the principles discussed in this brief can only be implemented successfully in schools where teachers receive support and designated time to plan and reflect collaboratively. Such schoolwide support was evident in a public school in Brooklyn, NY, where teachers organized a Professional Learning Community (PLC) around play and bilingualism:

Preschool teachers met once a week to explore topics on emergent literacy and play-based instruction that welcome and build on students' emergent multilingualism. During each session, teachers reflected on articles and videos, and thought of ways to adapt their classroom practices accordingly. Teachers were also allotted time to plan with the art and music teachers for interdisciplinary connections that could further extend students' play and multilingualism. During each session, teachers discussed their experiences throughout the previous week and shared anecdotes, ideas, and challenges. This succession of meetings allowed these teachers to reflect on their own learning and implement new approaches in their classrooms.

For a guide to developing a PLC around early childhood and bilingualism, see our resource, "Professional Learning Community on Early Childhood Education and Bilingualism" [INCLUDE LINK TO CUNY-NYSIEB/BERSSI RESOURCE]

Enabling teachers to use their Professional Development time to learn more about bilingualism and play-based learning was essential for teachers to engage in collaborative inquiry and planning. This Professional Learning Community is an excellent example of how administrators can provide teachers with the support and flexibility needed to learn about students' multilingual practices and implement the ideas and understandings that emerge from a PLC.

Schoolwide Practice: Supporting Teachers in Learning with and from Families

Allotting time for teachers to learn with and from families is essential. Some schools organize orientations, community events, open-school days, and other opportunities for families to lead events and share their funds of knowledge. The following vignette highlights how a preschool teacher on Manhattan's Lower East Side learns about her EMLLs and their families.

At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Gil gains insight into her students' and their families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds using a list of **"Questions to Ask Families of Emergent Multilingual Learners"**. These questions include:

- What languages do your family members speak at home?
- What languages does your child understand?
- In what language do you speak to your child most of the time?
- In what language does your child speak to you....to your family members?
- What are some ways your child uses gestures or objects to communicate?
- In what languages do you sing, read, or tell stories to your child?
- How has your child learned English so far (TV, internet, siblings, childcare, etc.)?

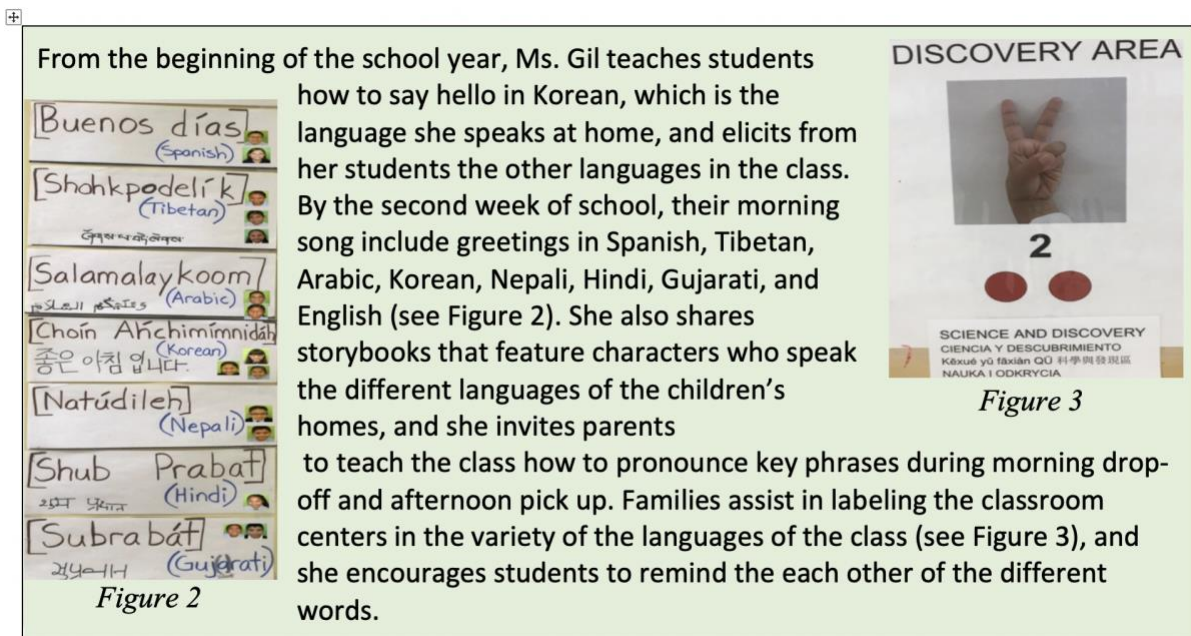
- What are some of your interests? What do you feel comfortable sharing with our class community?

Inspired by the intake questions in *Right from the Start: A Protocol for Identifying and Planning Instruction for Emergent Bilinguals in Universal Prekindergarten* (Morell & Aponte, 2016). These intake questions are also included in NYSED's Emergent Multilingual Learners Language Profile tool, which is available here [\[INCLUDE LINK TO NYSED'S WEBSITE/TOOL\]](#).

Families have a wealth of language and knowledge that can enrich the learning experiences of *all* the children. Ms. Gil uses this initial conversation with families as an opportunity to build rapport with them and recognize their continuous role as their child's first educators. Parents are reminded of the importance of continuing to develop their child's home language(s), and they are invited to share their hobbies, interests, and backgrounds with the class. Educational partnerships like these are essential for the success of EMLLS.

Classroom Practice: Partnering with Families to Honor and Build on their Multilingualism

Integrating families' home languages should be commonplace, rather than a special enhancement to instruction. The diverse multilingualism of the class should be highlighted in creative and natural ways throughout the school day. Below are a few ways in which Ms. Gil shares her enthusiasm for learning language from EMLLS and their families.



Phone conversations, audio and video recordings, and mobile applications are some creative and convenient opportunities for parents to contribute from afar. Students learn that their languaging is just as valuable as all others and become excited to language in ways that their

friends do. Beginning the year with this kind of partnership is a powerful way of honoring families' backgrounds and normalizing multilingualism.

Classroom Practice: Adapting Emergent Literacy and Play-Based Instruction to Build on Bilingual Language Practices

As teachers foster emergent literacy throughout the day, they must make space for multilingual interpretations and elicit multimodal ways of languaging. In this vignette, we can see how a teacher in the bilingual program in Brooklyn set the stage for her EMLLs to use their bilingual imaginations in the puppet show play center. After reading *The Three Little Pigs* in English and Spanish and inviting family members to read or tell the story in various languages, the teacher encouraged students to put their own spin on the story, rather than simply reenact it.



Inspired by the diverse languages in their community, one group of students decided that the pigs had recently arrived in New York from different countries and spoke different languages. The pigs became neighbors and friends, and they communicated with each other using English and their different languages. They also decided that the pigs' houses were built of seaweed, the palms of coconut trees, and wooden planks (building blocks). Moreover, students ended their version of the story with the wolf climbing down the kitchen window and landing in sancocho, a traditional soup from the Dominican Republic.



By setting up activities that encourage students to use *all* of their communicative resources in the play centers, this teacher encouraged EMLLs to bring their bilingual imaginations and diverse language practices into their play. Students' reimagining of *The Three Little Pigs* clearly reflects their understanding of dynamic identities in bilingual communities, as they applied their bilingual pride to creatively transform a traditional tale to reflect their bilingual lives.

Classroom Practice: Validating and Extending Students' Linguistic Repertoires

This final classroom vignette illustrates how teachers who are not familiar with EMLLs' home language practices can still understand, welcome, and extend children's full linguistic repertoire. Back in the Manhattan early childhood program, the teacher observes one student's, David's, verbal and non-verbal body language closely and learns the variety of facial expressions and sounds that he uses when he wants her attention. Although David uses many Spanish words at home, like many three-year olds, he mostly communicates and makes meaning of the world around him using a variety of non-verbal semiotic features:

After receiving the tambourine during morning meeting, David lifted one arm, raised his eyebrows, widened his eyes, and cheered, “aha, aha, aha!” Ms. Gil had been observing him and knew this was his way of showing excitement. She acknowledged him and repeated his languaging, then announced, “Look at David! He is showing us that he is excited! How else can we show that we are excited?” When a student waived a fist in the air and yelled, “Yes!”, Ms. Gil followed and encouraged other children to do as well. She asked other students how they show excitement and the class spent a few minutes engaging in a variety of language practices. They jumped, clapped, and shared their biggest smiles.

Ms. Gil also encouraged students to share the words they use to show excitement at home, emphasizing that there are many ways to show excitement. “I say ‘Hooray!’ or ‘Awesome!’ when I am excited. My Spanish friend says “Alá! What do you and your families say?” With this, students were encouraged to repeat phrases in each other’s languages, such as, “Ypa!”, “Hảo jile!”, “Yay”, “Hourra!”, and “Wā i”.

Ms. Gil validates David's feelings and multimodal languaging, encouraging him to use Spanish words while also introducing new English words. Through thoughtful daily interactions like this one, she moves her students from emergent multimodal languaging towards multilingualism.

Key Principles for Validating and Building on a Child’s Emergent Multilingualism

- Validate the linguistic features the child already uses before making connections and extending his/her language practices.
- Encourage children to use all their language practices and multimodal resources to make meaning, including gesturing, role-playing, drawing and singing.
- Pay less attention to what is “appropriate” in one language or another, and instead focus on the message and the way students are using *all* their language practices to express themselves and make meaning.
- Provide children with affordances to see all languages in action in different situations and for different contexts and tasks — in the community, in the media, in books.
- Use technology (i.e.: translation technologies) to understand and build on diverse languages and to maintain strong partnerships with families.

Conclusion

The classrooms featured in this Topic Brief highlight the many benefits of making EMLLs’ and their families’ multilingualism a natural part of the early childhood classroom. When multilingualism is not explicitly valued, children learn to suppress parts of their linguistic identities as they strive to communicate in English only. On the contrary, EMLLs thrive and multilingualism is normalized when their emergent language practices are validated and built

upon through emergent literacy and play. Adapting these key principles can help educators, families, and children recognize, cultivate, and celebrate multilingualism.

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