



Student Engagement:

An Essential Ingredient for the Success of Emergent Bilinguals

Introduction

Today, emergent bilinguals, also known as English language learners or English learners, make up 10% of the total K–12 public school population. By 2025, this number is expected to increase to 25%, meaning that one in every four students will be an emergent bilingual (NEA, 2019; Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

For all students, academic success is linked to motivation and engagement. How engaged are students in their classrooms, their schools, and their own learning? Research has shown that students who are motivated by and engaged in learning tend to perform considerably higher academically than do disengaged and unmotivated students (Fredericks et al., 2004).

Thus, as the emergent bilingual student population grows, it will be essential for educators and administrators to ensure that these students not only become engaged in their learning, but also stay engaged. But how? In this eBook, we aim to answer this question—first, by examining the importance of student engagement and possible challenges for emergent bilinguals. We then discuss the negative consequences of non-engagement. And finally, we offer ways for educators and administrators to improve motivation and engagement among their emergent bilingual students, for better academic outcomes.



By 2025, **one in every four** students will be an emergent bilingual

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Why student engagement matters and the role educators play

Across all subject areas and educational activities, research shows a strong correlation between student engagement and student achievement. The more students are engaged, the more they feel connected to their school experiences and develop more positive attitudes (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Learning improves when students are engaged and, inversely, tends to suffer when they're disengaged (Fredericks et al., 2004). In one study, half of students who dropped out of school said they did so because they were bored, unmotivated, and disengaged (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

HOW DO WE DEFINE ENGAGEMENT?

Research has identified three types of school-related engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004):

- **Behavioral engagement**—participation, or involvement in academic activities; this is considered essential for better academic outcomes
- **Emotional engagement**—relationships to teachers, peers, curriculum, and school
- **Cognitive engagement**—willingness to put forth the effort necessary to understand complex ideas and master challenging skills

EDUCATORS PLAY A KEY ROLE

Educators play a vital role in the motivation and engagement of students. In fact, research shows that higher levels of teacher support are associated with higher levels of engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004). To help ensure engagement, teachers must create a classroom environment in which students feel supported, safe, and valued (Dary et al., 2017).

School administrators and principals also play a key role in supporting student engagement, namely by providing their teachers with the freedom and resources needed to improve engagement in their classrooms (Hoerr, 2016). As a whole, schools must consider all dimensions of student engagement: individual, school environment, and family/community (Dary et al., 2017).

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Self-determination theory is a useful framework with which to assess student motivation. It examines how biological, social, and cultural conditions enhance or undermine our capacities for engagement and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In other words, what motivates people? While extrinsic motivation involves external factors, such as grades and assessments, intrinsic motivation involves internal factors, such as values and passions. For academic achievement, intrinsic motivation has been shown to be the more powerful of the two (Froiland et al., 2012).

There are three innate needs that, if met, allow for optimal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017):

1. **Autonomy**—a need to be a causal agent in one's own life
2. **Competence**—a need to control outcomes and experience mastery
3. **Relatedness**—a need to interact with, feel connected to, and care for others

In order to improve emergent bilinguals' motivation and engagement, it can help to assess whether these three needs are being met.

What limits emergent bilingual students' engagement?

While there are many factors—both at the societal level and individual level—that limit engagement for all students, here we will focus on educational limitations specific to emergent bilingual students.

CLASSROOM LESSONS AREN'T CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

When a classroom isn't culturally responsive, emergent bilinguals can feel marginalized, leading to disengagement and lack of motivation (Haneda & Wells, 2012; Manyak, 2007; Ferlazzo, 2015). An act as simple as pronouncing a student's name correctly can make a student feel more engaged, welcomed, and included. If students encounter teachers who don't take the time to learn their names or don't validate who they are, it can create a wall and hinder academic progress (Mitchell, 2016).

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPEAKING PRACTICE

Speaking practice is vital to both language learning and engagement. Yet in class, emergent bilinguals are often less vocal—and therefore less engaged—than their English-proficient peers are. In one study of emergent bilinguals' first year in a school district, an important finding was the minimal time they spent talking. Although well-intentioned, the teachers were hesitant to engage them in classroom discussion (Mohr, 2007). Whether or not they're encouraged to speak in class, emergent bilinguals may not have an adequate number of opportunities to practice speaking as part of instruction.

THE USE OF NATIVE LANGUAGES IS DISCOURAGED

Emergent bilinguals may be discouraged from using their native languages to speak and write while at school; their accents and pronunciation may also be discouraged and/or corrected. This can have unintended consequences, such as these students feeling inferior and disengaging from classroom lessons and discussion. Recent research has found that strategic use of a student's primary language—at school and at home—can help English language learning, especially when it comes to understanding instructions, grammar, and vocabulary, and developing relationships (Ferlazzo, 2017).

MORE TIME SPENT ON ASSESSMENT PREPARATION

According to a 2013 report, for emergent bilinguals, one factor that leads to higher dropout rates is a high-stakes accountability system in which a greater proportion of emergent bilingual students' instructional time is spent on assessment preparation compared with that of non-emergent-bilinguals (Amos, 2013). The takeaway seems clear: more testing and assessment do not lead to increased motivation or better student engagement.

K-12 TEACHERS LACK THE TRAINING THEY NEED

Because many teachers lack the training needed to effectively teach emergent bilingual students, they also lack the training needed to engage them (Sugarman, 2019). In 2000, a national survey reported that 41% of public school teachers taught emergent bilinguals. Yet less than a third of those teachers had even a modest level of training to support these students. A more recent survey, in 2012, revealed that 55% of teachers have at least one emergent bilingual student in their classrooms, but there is no evidence that shows teacher training is improving (Quintero & Hansen, 2017).

What are the negative effects of non-engagement?

A lack of student engagement can have a domino effect, impacting everything from academic performance to dropout rates. Like all students, emergent bilinguals are more cognitively engaged when they feel they can be successful (O'Rourke, 2017). These successes don't have to be major; rather, small, incremental "wins" have been shown to be more engaging and motivating for students.

However, when students struggle academically and socially or feel unwelcome, they can become less motivated, which can be compounded over the years. For example, a classroom that isn't culturally responsive can make an emergent bilingual student feel insignificant, resulting in lack of motivation and disengagement (Ferland, 2015).



More specifically, this lack of motivation and engagement can lead to:

- **Academic underperformance**—according to the US Department of Education, emergent bilinguals statistically underperform as compared to non-emergent-bilinguals (USDOE, 2016); during the 2015–16 academic year, only 67% of emergent bilinguals, versus 85% of non-emergent-bilinguals, graduated from high school on time (USDOE, 2016)
- **Fewer students in gifted and talented programs**—emergent bilinguals represent less than 3% of students in gifted and talented education nationwide and are underrepresented in gifted programs in almost every state (Sparks & Harwin, 2017)
- **Higher dropout rates**—emergent bilinguals are two times more likely to drop out than are native and fluent English speakers (Amos, 2013)

Taken together, the negative effects of non-engagement could have a number of individual, district-wide, and society-wide consequences, such as:

- **Lower ACGRs**—schools with lower adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGRs) could be labeled in need of improvement, negatively affecting their reputation, funding, and more (Sugarman, 2019)
- **Lower earnings**—individuals without a high school diploma experience lower earnings and higher unemployment rates than do those with a diploma (Sparks & Harwin, 2017; Sugarman, 2019; Haneda & Wells, 2012)
- **Economic impact**—lower graduation rates for emergent bilinguals represent a loss to society as a whole, because these students are unable to fulfill their potential as contributors to the nation's competitiveness in the global economy (Haneda & Wells, 2012)

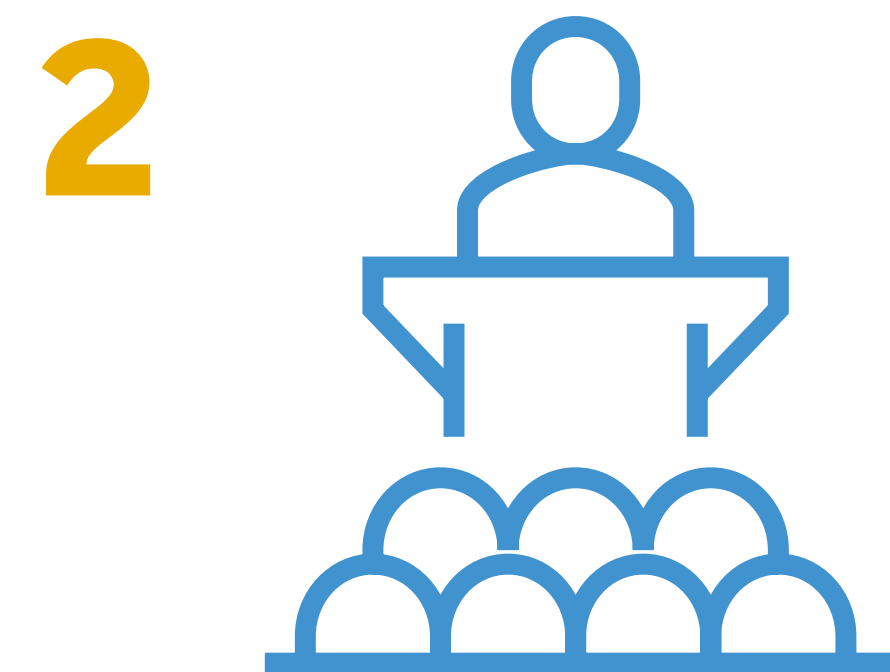
What educators can do to improve engagement

Here are **six** things educators can do to improve motivation and engagement among their emergent bilingual student populations.



CREATE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LESSONS AND CLASSROOMS

Culturally responsive teaching promotes high engagement by building on students' interests and connecting with their knowledge and lives. Emergent bilingual students bring a rich knowledge base with them to the learning environment—and the more an educator can surface this background knowledge, the better. To do so, teachers must consider instructional techniques, materials, their relationships with students, the classroom climate, and their own self-awareness.



EXPLORE AND ADDRESS IMPLICIT BIAS

In order to create a culturally responsive classroom, educators must first explore and address any implicit bias or preconceived notions about students' abilities (Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2006). Providing opportunities for students to think critically about inequities in their own or their classmates' experience is key too (Haneda & Wells, 2012).



INCORPORATE AN ASSET MODEL APPROACH

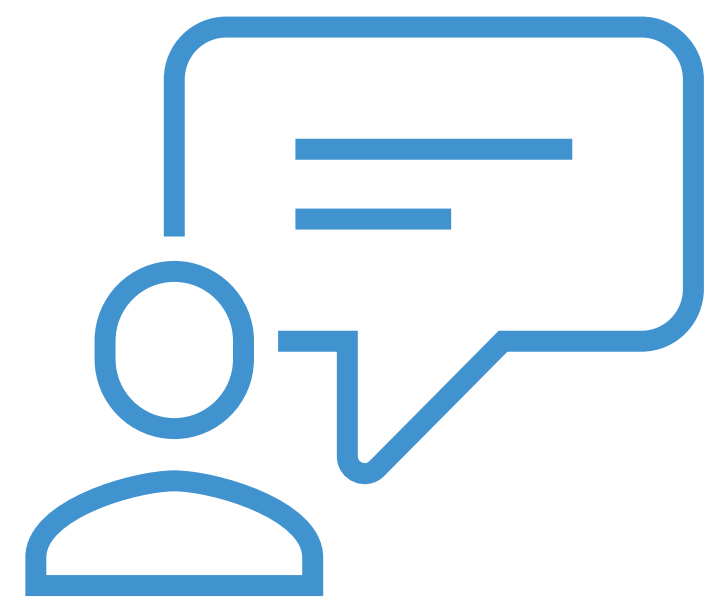
An asset-based approach counters more popular deficit-oriented teaching methods and helps ensure students see themselves and their communities reflected and valued in the content they're taught in school (New America, 2019). By focusing on what emergent bilinguals bring to the classroom, teachers can help improve emergent bilingual achievement and discourage them from dropping out (Amos, 2013).

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What educators can do to improve engagement (continued)

Here are **six** things educators can do to improve motivation and engagement among their emergent bilingual student populations.

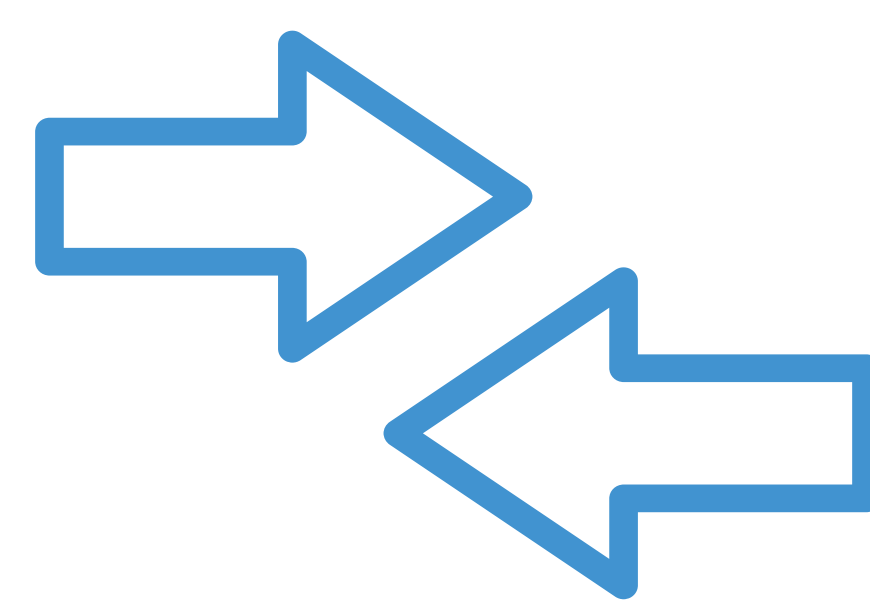
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INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPEAKING PRACTICE

Providing emergent bilinguals with ample opportunities to practice their academic and conversational speaking skills will not only teach them a new language but will also help them feel more comfortable engaging in classroom activities (Alrubail, 2016). One way to do this is to break language down—or scaffold it—for students, with the expectation that students will produce language, however little, every day. Educational technology that allows students to practice speaking can also help.

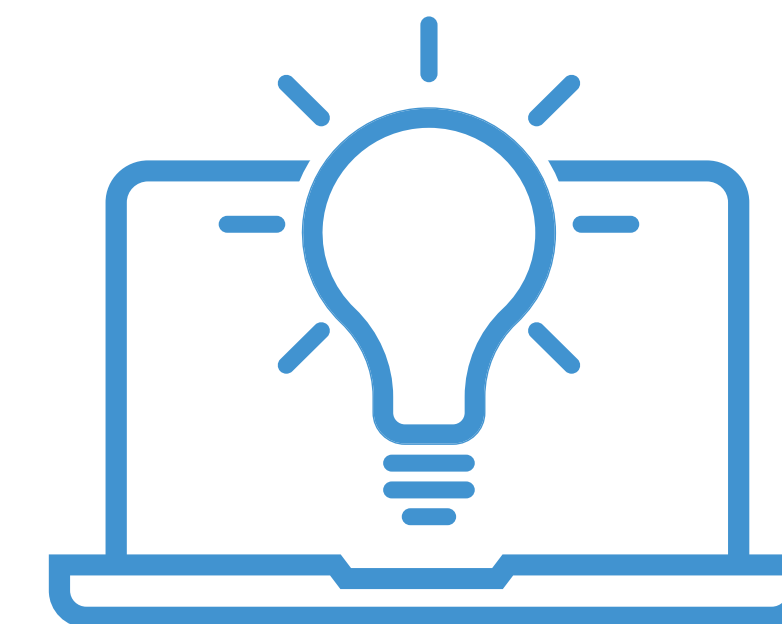
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BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ACADEMIC LEARNING

Designing English language learning programs to also prioritize academic rigor can address one of the primary causes of disengagement and dropping out: poor academic preparation (Amos, 2013). Emergent bilinguals benefit from activities that embrace their cultural and linguistic knowledge, enhance oral language development, and create opportunities to interact with print in meaningful ways (Guccione, 2011).

6



USE TECHNOLOGY FOR INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

Educational technology can allow for more individualized learning for emergent bilingual students, including corrective feedback and scaffolded instruction, for better student engagement (Tedick, 1998; Getting Smart, 2016). To learn more about the benefits of educational technology solutions that honor heritage language and student background knowledge while allowing students to practice speaking, [see page 9](#).

What administrators can do to improve engagement

School administrators and principals also play a key role in improving emergent bilingual students' engagement. Below are **three** things they can do to support their teachers and students.

1

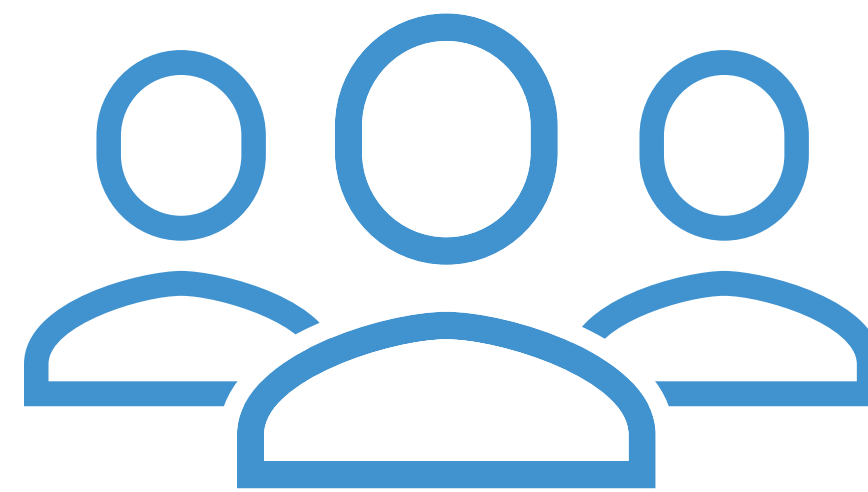


CLEARLY DEFINE AND COMMUNICATE BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Administrators, along with their educators, can establish how engagement is identified and assessed in their schools. In other words, they can answer the following questions (Cooper, 2020):

- How does our school define engagement?
- What does engagement look like?
- How do we know if emergent bilingual students are being successfully engaged?

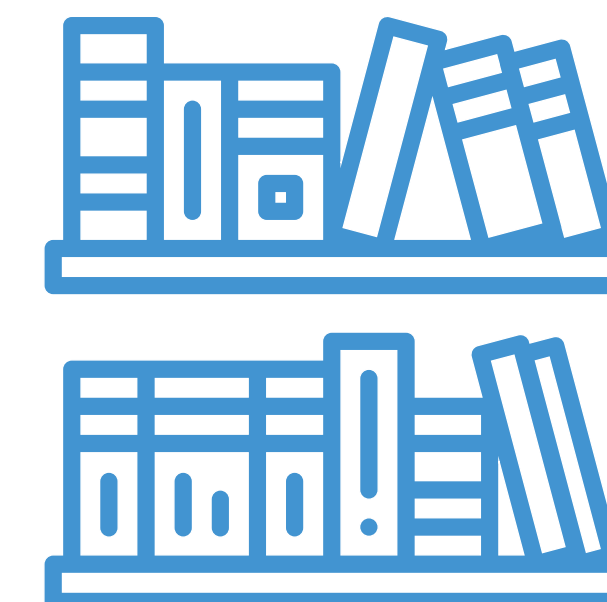
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CREATE A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL-WIDE ENVIRONMENT

Administrators can start by considering their own assumptions, beliefs, and values, and how these things create a lens through which they see the world. They can familiarize themselves “with culturally responsive pedagogy, offer curriculum and assessments that are unbiased and culturally sensitive, [and] support teachers in their efforts to transform their teaching practices” (NASSP, 2019, p. 5). And they can model expectations for educators and students by using language that is respectful of all cultures (NASSP, 2019). This will help create a school environment in which both emergent bilinguals and their families feel welcome, valued, and appreciated.

3



PROVIDE TEACHERS WITH THE RESOURCES THEY NEED

Administrators can further support their teachers by providing them with professional development opportunities (NASSP, 2019) to help them better engage emergent bilinguals. Better and more accurate assessment tools can help too. How? Measuring emergent bilinguals' progress can be challenging because each assessment represents just a moment in time (Williams, 2015). Tools that are specifically designed to assess both the English language proficiency and academic skills of emergent bilinguals can help counter this; better assessments can allow teachers to target specific areas where more engagement is needed.

How the right EdTech solution can help improve engagement

Adaptive blended learning technology has proven to be an effective way to support emergent bilinguals by combining English language and academic learning. Below are some of the ways educational technology, or EdTech, can help improve emergent bilingual students' engagement in learning.

The right EdTech solution can provide:

- ✓ A safe, private, nonjudgmental environment in which emergent bilinguals can practice their speaking skills using speech recognition technology; this frees them up to make mistakes, gain skills, and increase confidence
- ✓ Opportunities for the components of self-determination to be developed by allowing students to choose which path or activity they do that day (autonomy); providing them with a visual representation of their progress (competence); and enabling them to see themselves in the program's stories and characters (relatedness)
- ✓ A way to keep students engaged both inside and outside the classroom
- ✓ A variety of media that honors emergent bilinguals' heritage culture (relatedness), motivating and engaging them in new and individualized ways (e.g., video, games, interactive programs, etc.)
- ✓ Independent learning opportunities, during which emergent bilinguals can learn at their own pace
- ✓ Real-time data that can help educators understand students' levels of knowledge and proficiency, enabling them to personalize learning and make more informed instructional decisions
- ✓ Ongoing assessment that allows teachers to see how engaged their emergent bilingual students are with the curriculum, as measured by their progress



Conclusion

Engaging emergent bilingual students in academic instruction—and keeping them engaged—is critical. When students aren't engaged, academic performance can suffer, leading to a number of negative outcomes, from higher dropout rates to lower earnings later in life.

Educators and administrators play a key role in improving engagement among this growing student population. They can create more culturally responsive classrooms and schools, bridge the gap between English language learning and academic learning, and increase opportunities for speaking practice, among other things.

Educational technology solutions that support these needs have been shown to help. The right technology tool can make emergent bilingual students feel welcome and valued. It can provide more opportunities for speaking practice. And it can foster the self-determination and intrinsic motivation needed for better engagement and academic success. EdTech can also provide teachers with the real-time data they need in order to personalize instruction for emergent bilinguals, report on progress, and target specific areas for engagement.

As the number of emergent bilinguals in our public schools continues to increase, improving their academic engagement will not only benefit them—it will benefit us all, altering the educational landscape for the better.

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