

Secondary Long-term Emergent Bilingual Students' Educational Needs

Won Gyoung Kim
Texas A&M International University
United States

Abstract

Secondary long-term emergent bilingual students have difficulties in learning due to their academic gaps accumulated over years of schooling. To understand these students' academic challenges and their educational needs, a qualitative research study was conducted grounded a naturalistic inquiry approach. Individual in-depth interviews were the main sources of data, and language and academic performance records were collected to examine programs and services participants had received. Findings revealed that participants' academic struggles were associated with their limited learning opportunities over years of previous schooling. The results suggest a critical need of adequate programs and services to address these students' significant academic gaps.

1. Introduction

Secondary long-term emergent bilingual students (EBS), also known as English language learners, (ELLs) have spent many years in public schools without being adequately served [13]. These students have experienced pervasive problems of academic failure, inappropriate referral to special education, high retention, and dropout. Data indicate that a significant number of emergent bilingual students in secondary school, especially schools in large urban school districts, are long-term EBS who have attended public schools in the United States for seven years or more without reaching a fluent level in English determined by the state and federal education system.

According to Jacobs [12], long-term emergent bilingual students have difficulties in learning at school because their English language and academic literacy skills are still developing. This phenomenon of long-term EBS' underachievement is not new to the field as researchers brought this issue about two decades ago. Olsen and Jaramillo [18] studied adolescent English language learners and classified them into three distinct groups: (1) newly-arrived students with adequate formal schooling, (2) newly-arrived students with limited formal schooling, and (3) long-term ELLs.

Students in the first group have been schooled in the United States for five years or fewer. These students usually acquire academic languages in a

relatively short period of time because they brought strong academic background knowledge. Students in the second group have brought limited literacy skills in their home language due to the interrupted formal education. They often have difficulties in learning English and other subject contents because of lacking in prior knowledge [9]. The students in the third group, which is the focus of this study, have been schooled in the United States for seven years or more but have not sufficiently developed academic literacy skills in either English or their home language. As a result, they poorly perform across all academic subjects.

Freeman and colleagues [8] conducted case studies with aforementioned three distinct types of emergent bilingual students and found four effective practices that teachers could use when teaching low-achieving EBS: (a) engaging students in challenging theme-based curriculum to develop academic concepts, (b) drawing on students' backgrounds: their experiences, cultures, and languages, (c) organizing collaborative activities and scaffold instruction to build students' academic English proficiency, and (d) creating confident students who value school and value themselves as learners. The researchers asserted the need of research-based curriculum that could challenge these learners without overwhelming them.

2. Characteristics of Secondary Emergent Bilingual Students

Several common characteristics that describe secondary long-term emergent bilingual students have emerged from research [2] [9] [17]. Long-term emergent bilingual students: (a) are often bilingual in social settings but have limited literacy skills in both their home language and English, (b) have significant gaps in academic background knowledge, and (c) have experienced inconsistent schooling due to incoherent language programs within a school and across schools they have attended or frequent moves between the United States and their country of origin.

Long-term EBS exhibit significant gaps in academic background knowledge [2]. Literacy skills affect academic achievement in content areas. To be able to participate in academic demands of secondary school curriculum, students must understand complex language structures, including specialized academic vocabulary, complex syntax, and academic text [12]. Because long-term EBS have not developed necessary

literacy skills in English, they have missed big chunks of curriculum that require literacy skills for years of schooling, resulting in significant gaps in academic background knowledge. Because long-term EBS are far below grade level in reading and writing, they are not able to fully access to all content curricula that require literacy skills. Over the course of their schooling, gaps in literacy skills have been widen, and those gaps critically affect their academic attainment of all subject matters in high school.

Menken and Klyen [15] considered long-term EBS' inconsistency in schooling in the United States as one of the key characteristics of this population. Several factors were discussed to explain this inconsistency, including attending multiple schools from elementary to high schools, experience in changing from bilingual to ESL or vice versa within school or across schools, and the absence of language support programs. This inconsistency limits EBS' opportunities to develop language and academic literacy skills in both English and their language of origin, having them remain in an emergent bilingual status for a long period of time.

2.1. Language Programs and Services

Research-driven instructions that meet the needs of long-term emergent bilingual students' academic literacy development are critically necessary to support this population. A study conducted by the Council of Great City Schools [5] investigated English learner programs in five school districts and found that though districts had concerns about these students, they had neither a program to support EBS nor formal approaches designed for these students. As a consequence, long-term EBS in secondary school are typically placed in one of the following learning environments: (a) English as a second language (ESL) or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program designed for new comers, (b) reading remedial programs designed for low performing students or students with specific learning disabilities, and (c) the placement in mainstream classrooms with no support.

An ESL program in secondary school is typically designed for students who recently arrived at the United States with an assumption that their struggling is due to learning new English language skills. [3] Therefore, the program does not address long-term EBS' unique linguistic needs and academic literacy gaps [17][28]. In addition, the learning environment of ESL programs is not rigorous because the programs are intended to compensate for students' limited language skills [3][11]. Valdez [19] argued the problems in ESL classes. She pointed out long-term EBS in secondary school are often trapped in a cycle of ESL classes, "ESL ghetto," in which they do not learn academic English or content area academic skills. Callahan and colleagues [4] studied about the effects of the ESL placement on secondary emergent bilingual students' college preparation and academic

achievement. They analyzed data from Educational Longitudinal Study conducted by the United States National Center for Educational Statistics and concluded that the ESL placement might benefit students who recently immigrated with limited English fluency; however, long-term emergent bilingual students would not benefit because their linguistic and academic needs are different. The study also addressed that schools must be cautious to retain English language learners in ESL program because students could be stuck in lower level of language development as the program is not academically challenging.

Schools often place long-term EBS in modified instructional programs designed for native English-speaking students with special learning needs. The focus of these intervention programs is primarily on reading, not developing all domains of English language skills, including listening, speaking, and writing, thus these programs merely support long-term EBS' linguistic and academic needs [2]. In addition, modified instructional programs are in general linguistically and academically less rigorous than programs provided in mainstream instructions. Therefore, placing long-term EBS in remedial course works might result in leaving them further behind from curricula and add another layer on their academic gaps. Callahan [2] argued that reading intervention programs did not meet the needs of EBS, especially long-term EBS, because the focus of the programs was not developing language and academic literacy skills in a holistic manner. She compared the effect of a reading intervention program to that of an English language development (ELD) program on secondary EBS' academic outcomes and found that students who received the ELD instruction earned significantly higher language scores than those who were placed in the reading intervention program. The researcher attributed this result to the fact that ELD programs address holistic language development of speaking, listening, reading, and writing and make contents connect through using themes while reading intervention programs exclusively focus on reading.

Another common placement for long-term EBS is mainstream classrooms with no language support. In mainstream classrooms, long-term EBS are with English proficient students, and teachers often are unaware that they have long-term EBS in their classes. In general, instructions, curricula, and materials in mainstream classrooms do not address long-term EBS' learning needs [17]. Because these long-term EBS have a significant academic literacy gap, if instructions and materials do not address that gap, they might not access to the contents taught.

Since existing programs and instructional approaches little support long-term EBS' linguistic and academic needs, it is critically necessary to develop instructional programs and services grounded on pedagogical principles that address possible reasons of long-term emergent bilingual students' academic underachievement. The Transformative

Multiliteracies Pedagogy discussed by Cummins [6] acknowledges factors relating to the academic underachievement of long-term EBS and emphasizes the importance of creating learning contexts that promote these learners’ literacy engagement.

2.2. Transformative Multiliteracies Pedagogy

Transformative Multiliteracies Pedagogy (TMP) is a framework that addresses learners’ literacy engagement. In this TMP framework, teachers need to create maximum opportunities for learners to become actively engaged in literacy activities. From this framework, secondary long-term EBS’ literacy engagement will be enhanced when “(a) students’ prior knowledge is activated; (b) their ability to understand and use academic language is supported through specific instructional strategies (scaffolding meaning); (c) their identities are affirmed; and (d) their knowledge of, and control over, language is extended across the curriculum (p.48).”

3. Method

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of long-term emergent bilingual students’ academic challenges through examining their experience of schooling. As this is an area where little is known, Naturalistic Inquiry (NI) approach is utilized.

3.1. Research Questions

Research questions developed for data collection are: (a) What factors contribute to secondary long-term emergent bilingual students’ academic challenges? (b) What do secondary long-term emergent bilingual students think they need to improve their academic literacy skills?

3.2. Research Design

A qualitative research design based on the NI paradigm was undertaken to answer the questions posited [14]. In this NI paradigm, the research promoted to understand the nature of the problems relating to long-term EBS’ academic struggles.

Thirteen long-term emergent bilingual students who enrolled in a school district located in central Texas participated in this study. These students were selected through purposeful sampling, selecting samples based on from which the research can learn the most about the issues, because it is appropriate when the focus of research is to understand and gain insight about the nature of the phenomenon. The purposeful sampling considers unique and essential attributes of the phenomenon of interest. The essential

attributes of the participants in this study are secondary long-term emergent bilingual students who have attended public schools in the United States for seven years or more without reaching a fluent level in English determined by the state and federal education system.

Data sources for this study included individual in-depth interviews and various school documents, including participants’ cumulative folder, Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) documents, and assessment records. Data analysis is an ongoing process of meaning making [16] in this research process, so it concurrently occurred with the data collection. During the initial stage of the data analysis, the focus was gaining a sense of emerging themes in the data. To do that, the transcribed data were divided into meaningful chunks with descriptive categories, and then, patterns emerged from the data were examined.

The trustworthiness of the findings of the study was ensured by taking measures to assure credibility and confirmability [7]. To accurately record and interpret the views of long-term emergent bilingual students about their school experiences and academic needs under scrutiny, member checks, the maintenance of reflexive journal, and peer debriefing were utilized.

4. Findings

Profiles of participating EBS are presented in Table 1. All students had learned Spanish as their first language, and approximately 50% of them were born in the United States.

Table 1. Participants’ Profiles

Grade Level	Participants
12 th	Female: Angie, Doris, Ileana ¹ Male: Benito, Cesar
11 th	Male: Tristan
10 th	Female: Elisa, Hazel, Jamie Male: Geon, Leon, Messi, Norman

During the interviews, students shared their views on learning experiences. They believed that they made a huge progress in learning English and learning academic subjects in English throughout schooling. Students also indicated that language services that they had received were helpful; however, they asserted that it was a huge challenge that they had to learn without knowing the language of instruction. Students expressed their difficulties in learning academic subjects in English, particularly in middle school years, because they did not have sufficiently developed English literacy skills.

¹ Each participant selected his or her pseudonym in order to protect the student’s identity.

4.1. Factors contribute to School Challenges

Participating students perceived that they received very limited linguistic and academic support in secondary school. According to school records, these students were placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program called content-based ESL in the district. Students' description of the ESL programs and the analysis of school records revealed that a structure of ESL programs was not clearly established in the district. For example, there were seven high schools in the district including two alternative schools. The significant inconsistency was found across the campus in terms of the number of ESL staff, types of ESL programs implemented, and services available for emergent bilingual students. Based on data collected from the LPAC report, participants' course schedules, and transcribed interviews, the services provided for participants during their secondary school years were identified: Reading Remedial Program titled READ180 (an intervention program designed for struggling readers in grades 4-12, developed by Scholastic Inc.), ESOL/ESL with Push-In support, and Pull-out TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) Intervention.

According to the course catalogue published by the district, English/ESL class in secondary school was designed to serve recent-arrival students who came to the United States within the past three years. Among 13 participating EBS, five students were eligible to receive ESL services when they entered middle school. Of those, only two students, Ileana and Messi who attended the School A received ESL services either 6th or 7th grades. Three students, Angie, Benito, and Norman who attended the School B, were not provided ESL classes: Angie received Push-In support in a few selected courses. Benito and Norman were placed in READ 180 in 8th grade.

Ileana was placed in the ESL class during her 6th grade and the first three months of 7th grade. In her ESL classroom, she met recent-arrival emergent bilinguals who were learning English. Her ESL teacher was not bilingual; however, there was a bilingual assistant who could help students by translating assignments in English to Spanish: "Because she (ESL teacher) didn't really speak Spanish to us, the other lady was just like telling us, you know, she was translating." Ileana stated that: "I learned a lot, and then by 7th grade, I was able to understand." In 8th grade, Ileana was placed in mainstream classes without language support services. On the state assessments administered at the end of her 8th grade, Ileana met the satisfactory criteria in reading, math, and social studies, but not in science.

Messi was placed in an ESL class during his 6th and 7th grades. In 8th grade, he moved to a different middle school in the district and placed in a READ180

class. According to Messi, in his ESL class, he was placed in a Rosetta stone program, a commercial language reading program, to practice English. Messi felt it was helpful for him to learn basic conversational English. He also felt the Rosetta stone program was much better than the READ180 program because he was able to see his progress in learning English language. The state assessments that he took at the end of 8th grade, he passed social studies but did not meet the satisfactory criteria in English, math, and science.

Angie did not have an ESL class on her schedule; however, she had a teacher who came to her core classes and helped her when she did not understand the meanings of English words or concepts. Angie described that in core classes that she took, there were five to eight emergent bilingual students with a majority of native English-speaking students. An ESL supporting teacher who was bilingual followed these students and helped them when they needed.

As another contributing factor for their academic challenges, participating students mentioned their course placement. All students enrolled in 10th grade shared their concerns about uncondusive learning environment they were placed in. The course schedule of all participating 10th graders was identical. Their schedules included four core courses of English, math, world history, and chemistry that marked with EOC, End Of Course². Participants brought an issue that their placement in EOC classes might hinder them from learning because the learning environment was distractive, and the classes were not rigorous since they mainly focused on EOC preparation. Geon mentioned that "EOC means all the Mexicans, people from other states...I don't know it distracted me so much. I just wish like I could be by myself in one class, and just learn everything, and then, I think I'll learn. In a whole class, there, I don't really learn a lot." Elisa described EOC classes as follows: "They are all native Spanish speakers... They like play around and yell at each other. I have all of them... I need to be less distracted."

4.2. Educational needs to improve language and academic literacy skills

A majority of students asserted that they needed continuous bilingual support in secondary school to learn better and improve their academic literacy skills. During the interviews, participants expressed their challenges in learning during middle school years due to the drastic changes in language services. The bilingual services were not available at schools in the secondary level in the district. These students were expected to learn all subjects in English regardless of their progress in English language fluency. Several students mentioned that they had difficulties in

² The state of Texas developed a standardized assessment system called STAAR-EOC, State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness-End of Course.

understanding learning materials and classroom dynamics.

It (middle school) was a kind of hard because I used to have a bilingual in elementary. I had paid full, a lot of attention so I would understand what they were talking about. (Elisa)

It was harder because everything we had to learn in English...I learned English (in elementary), but we didn't learn like deep, deep English. (Jamie)

Students also expressed their need of appropriate programs to improve their academic vocabulary and writing skills. When participants were asked what they thought needed to work to succeed in school, a majority of students mentioned that they should learn “big words” and develop good writing skills. During the interview, students discussed their critical need to develop academic vocabulary skills to perform well in school. In addition, several students indicated that they must work on spelling and writing skills.

One of the hard things is writing. I can speak English good and everything, but my writing part, I think it's the one that's messing me up... The thing messed me up more is how, like the words, how to spell them. (Leon)

It (reading a book in English) was actually kinds of hard because of vocabulary. Sometimes I was confused and didn't understand. (Messi)

I know how to speak already. Writing, I just have hard time to write like grammar and everything...when I write, like a story, I don't know how to put it together. (Norman)

My spelling, I need to practice on that, like (need to) know how to spell bigger words and hard words. (Tristan)

5. Discussion

Findings of the study indicated that programs and services participating emergent bilingual students received did not adequately help them develop English language fluency and academic literacy skills. These students had difficulties in learning English and mastering academic content in English in secondary school because they had limited opportunities to learn curricula required to succeed in classes.

5.1. Gaps in Opportunity

Participants in this study neither sufficiently learned English nor maintained their native language skills in the bilingual learning environment provided. A majority of participants remained a *limited* level in their English language proficiency for all their secondary school years, and more than a half of them

did not pass or performed minimally on the beginning or intermediate level Spanish courses in high school.

Valdez [19] argued that Emergent bilingual students are marginalized linguistically and academically through being underserved in bilingual program services. All participants in this study attended a transitional bilingual program in elementary school and shifted to English-only instruction in middle school. In high school, all of them took Spanish as a required course for Language Other Than English; many of them struggled and did not pass the course.

Harklau [11] discussed that emergent bilingual students' underachievement is related to the learning environment in which they are engaged in below-standard course works that covered simplified content. This inadequate placement would result in limiting EBS' exposure to the academic content necessary to master. When students in this study entered middle school, they felt challenges because they had not been prepared to learn in English only instruction. Nevertheless, these students were placed in mainstream classrooms with minimal or without any linguistic support. Although they were continuously classified as English language learners, discrete ESL services were not available for them in secondary school. Because these learners had been underserved in bilingual programs in elementary school, they could only marginally learn. They were excluded from the formal curriculum while they had been learning English in elementary. In middle school, as these learners' academic performance was below grade level, they were placed in reading remedial programs; however, this placement created another layer of the gap in opportunity to learn because they could not access to the rigor of the full curriculum that is crucial for success in secondary school, resulting in their limited learning.

Long-term EBS participated in this study were placed in low-level courses in high school. This placement would result in their under-preparation for college and career readiness. Due to their low-level proficiency in English language and academic underachievement, all students in this study were identified as academically at-risk, and they were placed in low-level classes in high school. Callahan [3] argued that placing ELLs in low-track classes limits long-term EBS' opportunity to learn because the structure of curricula denies them to access to challenging academic opportunities. In addition, the relationship between teachers and students in low-level classes are weak and teachers' expectations are low. Findings of this study are consistent with the results of the previous research about this population in terms of “curriculum casualty” and emergent bilingual students' under-preparation.

Seven 10th grade students participated in this study were grouped together in their core academic courses. During the interview, a majority of them discussed the problems of the placement in those cohort classes. Leon discussed that he hardly learned

in those classes because the learning environments were distractive. After he had made changes in his course schedule, according to him, his performance significantly improved because the learning environment of a regular class he transferred to was much structured, so he could concentrate on learning. Elisa shared her perceptions about teachers' attitude towards long-term EBS in those cohort classes. She observed that sometimes teachers did give up teaching them when students showed undesirable behaviors. Elisa believed she did not learn much from those classes. Several students in this study perceived that their slow progress in learning was caused by the unfavorable learning environment. Findings revealed that curriculum casualties throughout schooling limit these students' learning opportunity, resulting in their academic underachievement.

Several students discussed the need of content area support to learn. Geon believed that the ESL program could not help him learn because his academic underachievement was not related to his skills in English language but the lack of understanding the concepts in academic subjects. Callahan and her colleagues [4] examined the effects of placing adolescent emergent bilingual students in an ESL program and argued that "If ESL placement is continued over time, it may undermine long-term academic achievement. If language acquisition remains the primary focus of ESL at the expense of academic rigor, our evidence suggests that ELLs will be academically marginalized." (p.104)

Callahan [3] indicated that emergent bilingual students could be trapped in "a vicious cycle" if the reclassification requirements are too stringent. To exit from bilingual or ESL programs in the district, emergent bilingual students must demonstrate their fluency in oral language skills measured by using WMLS-R³ scores, advanced high rate in TELPAS⁴ writing, and the satisfactory level in the state assessments in reading and writing. Little research is available regarding whether ESL exit criteria can reliably measure EBS' readiness to learn without language services.

Many long-term EBS in this study were unable to exit from ESL programs for either linguistic or academic reasons, or both. For example, Cesar reached a fluent level in English in 9th grade; however, because he did not meet the satisfactory criteria in state reading test, he was unable to exit from ESL program. In Elisa's case, she met the exit criteria in all three areas of WMLS-R, TELPAS, and state

assessments in reading and writing when she was 6th and 7th grade, so she could have existed from ESL program; the LPAC committee did not reclassify her to non-ESL students without any explanation. In 8th and 9th grade, her language scores fell down from fluent to limited, so she did not meet the exit criteria. Elisa should have been exposed to advanced curriculum because she could benefit from academically challenging programs.

Several participants in this study (i.e., Jamie, Cesar, Elisa, and Leon) might learn better if they were exit from ESL programs and placed in high quality content area instructions. These learners were placed in linguistically and academically less rigorous instruction, so they had limited opportunity to acquire academic competency.

6. Implications

Research about long-term emergent bilingual students suggests that the placement of these students in low track classes or reading intervention programs might widen academic gaps because they do not address long-term EBS' needs and limit access to the full curriculum. In this study, the district used the READ180 program for low achieving emergent bilingual students in secondary school; however, students' low language scores and their ongoing academic underachievement suggest the program was not sufficient. Since these long-term EBS are already behind, they need a high-quality academic literacy development program that effectively supports their subject matter learning.

When long-term emergent bilingual students in this study entered the high school in the district, they already had academic gaps developed over previous school years. Therefore, curriculum and instruction in high school should address these gaps so they could learn. There is a critical need to specifically designed curriculum and instruction to provide long-term emergent bilinguals with opportunities to enhance their academic vocabulary, to gain extensive exposure to academically relevant texts, and to develop high quality writing skills. These skills are critically important for their college and career readiness.

7. Conclusion

Research regarding academic challenges of struggling secondary long-term emergent bilingual

³ The Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey-Revised (WMLS-R) is a nationally-normed measure of English Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), developed by Riverside Publishing. The school district uses MMLS-R to measure the CALP of English language learners to determine the students' eligibility to receive language support services. The scores have levels: 1 (negligible), 2 (very limited), 3 (limited), 3.5 (limited to fluent), 4 (fluent), 4.5 (fluent to advanced), 5 (advanced), and 6 (very advanced).

⁴ TELPAS is designed to assess the progress that English language learners make in learning the English language. It is in alignment with the Texas English Language Proficiency Standards

(ELPS), which are the part of the Texas Essential Knowledge and skills (TEKS). English language learners in kindergarten through the grade 12 are evaluated in four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in spring of each school year. There are four proficiency levels of beginning, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high.

students is currently limited. Findings of this study may contribute to increase understanding of the characteristics of this population and the reality of their academic underachievement. The results of the study also address the importance of creating learning opportunities for these students, so they could engage in academic language and content learning. Participants' schooling experience provides possible contributing factors for their academic challenges in secondary school. Preventative approaches, adequate language and academic services in elementary bilingual education settings, and the quality of content area instruction in secondary school would help emergent bilingual students develop bilingual literacy skills in both languages.

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