# ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING SPANISH-ENGLISH EMERGENT BILINGUAL STUDENTS

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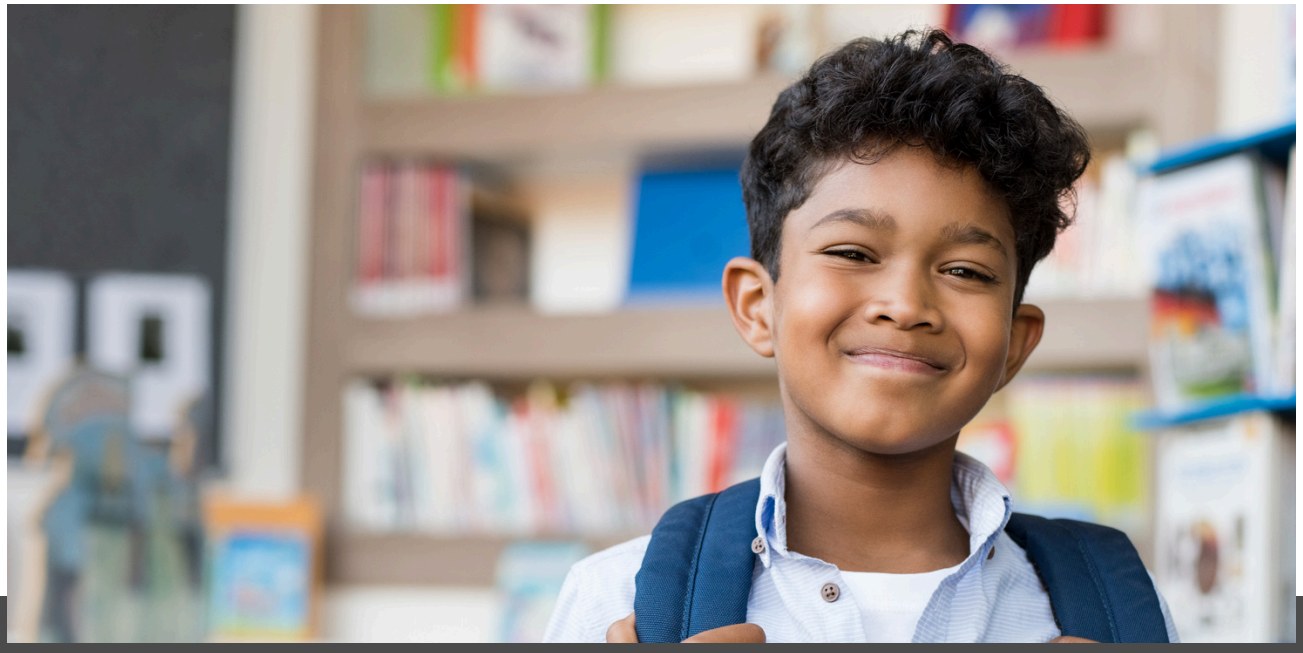
The percentage of multilingual learners (MLs) in U.S. classrooms has increased consistently in recent decades. In the fall of 2021, over 10% of the students attending public schools (about 5.3 million students) were from homes where a language other than English was spoken (NCES, 2024). Of those, over 4 million students (nearly 77% of all MLs) were from homes reportedly using Spanish (NCES, 2024). In U.S. classrooms where English is the primary language spoken, students with a non-English first language who are learning English, or emergent bilingual students, often experience unique academic challenges due to language barriers (Piñon et al., 2022). Thus, they represent a large percentage of the students experiencing gaps in academic achievement relative to peers.



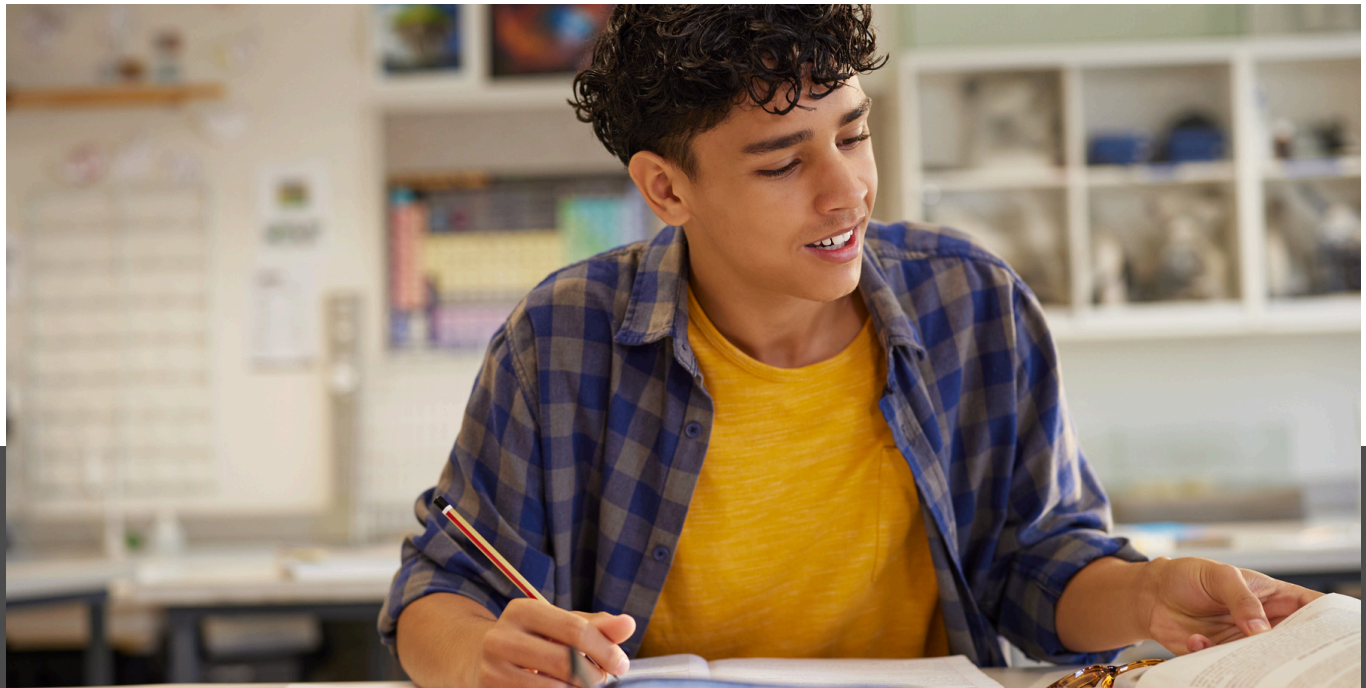
Studies in the field of multilingual learning offer insights into the various ways K-12 teachers and schools can support their emergent bilingual students and work to close achievement gaps.

According to the theory of linguistic interdependence (Cummins, 1979; 1984) and studies examining cross-linguistic transfer (Chung et al., 2019; Salmona Madriñan, 2014), proficiency in the literacy skills of one language can facilitate the acquisition of those same skills in another language. For Spanish and English in particular, there is evidence that the skills and strategies involved in learning sentence syntax (Leider et al., 2018), word knowledge (Soto Huerta, 2012), and listening or reading comprehension may transfer between languages (Proctor et al., 2017), due to the languages' closely related orthographies (Geva & Siegel, 2000). Furthermore, certain skills in Spanish can predict reading abilities in English, including alphabet knowledge, word reading, and oral language proficiency (Grimm et al., 2017; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017; Proctor et al., 2017; Relyea & Amendum, 2019). Linguistic similarities shared between the two languages offer a unique leverage for language learning in English-only classrooms and suggest that instruction centered around transferable skills can support students' English language development.

Although Spanish and English share several similarities that position emergent bilingual students to transfer literacy skills across both languages, there are nuances in the languages that can create unique challenges for Spanish-dominant students who are learning English. The following sections will provide an overview of similarities as well as some key differences between the two languages that often present challenges for Spanish-English emergent bilingual students. These similarities and distinctions will be used to highlight areas in which teachers can provide language and literacy instruction or support to their students.

## 1. PHONOLOGY AND ORTHOGRAPHY

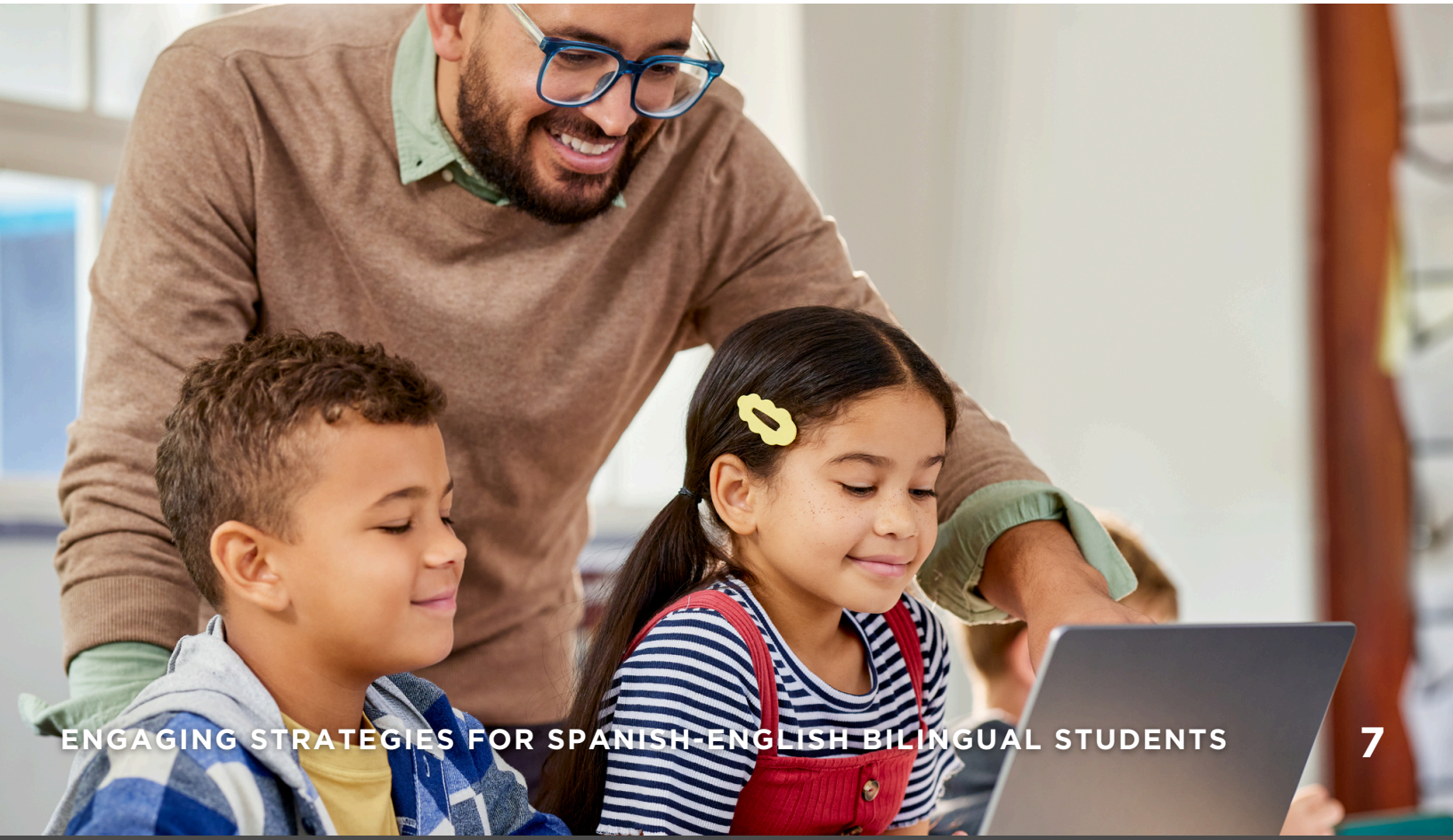
Both Spanish and English are derived from the Roman alphabet and use similar script systems (Yang et al., 2020), so knowledge of alphabetic letters often transfers between languages (Proctor et al., 2017). These similar alphabetic systems also result in the transfer of many letter-sound correlations as well as consonant spelling patterns (Zaretsky, 2020). Nonetheless, there are phonetic and orthographic differences that may interfere with emergent bilingual students' English word decoding, spelling skills, and pronunciation.



For example, Spanish has just five primary vowel phonemes that correspond to six graphemes (/ah/-*a*, /eh/-*e*, /ee/-*i*, /ee/-*y*, /oh/-*o*, and /oo/-*u*) (Zhang et al., 2020), whereas English has multiple vowel phonemes and corresponding graphemes that require more complex articulation (Hevia-Tuero et al., 2021; Zaretsky, 2020).

This complexity is similar in other letter-sound correspondences as well because English phonemes can be spelled in multiple ways (e.g., the /k/ sound in *music*, *kit*, *chorus*, and *lock*), making phoneme-grapheme relationships much less predictable compared to the highly consistent sound-symbol relationships in Spanish (Marks, 2022). In addition, certain consonants produce very different sounds in the two languages such as the sounds created by letters *ll*, *h*, *j*, *rr*, and *x* (Colorín Colorado, 2007; Zaretsky, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Finally, Spanish has fewer digraphs than English, so there are several English letter combinations that are either not common or simply do not exist in Spanish (Hevia-Tuero et al., 2021), such as the blends and digraphs *sh*, *th*, *ph*, *str*, *sl*, *kn*, *wr*, *ck*, *ng*, and *gh*, among others (Colorín Colorado, 2007).

Although the two languages are quite different when it comes to the transparency of their sound-symbol relationships and some spelling conventions, Spanish and English share the same alphabet and many sound-letter correspondences. Therefore, students from a Spanish-speaking background who are learning English can benefit from explicit instruction in English phonemic awareness, phonics, letter-sound correspondences, spelling, and pronunciation (Ford et al., 2018; Zaretsky, 2020). In particular, explicit instruction should address English short and long vowel sounds and spellings; consonants that represent multiple sounds (e.g., the letter g making the differing sounds /g/ as in guess and /j/ as in age); and the consonant sounds that differ in the two languages (ll, h, j, r, rr, and x); and English digraphs, blends, and diphthongs.



## 2. GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

In addition to differences in letter sounds and spelling, Spanish and English also have differences in language structures such as grammar and sentence structure. For example, English and Spanish differ in how adjectives and nouns are arranged in sentences and phrases (King, 2023). In English, adjectives usually precede the noun in descriptive phrases (e.g., *a red house*). However, adjectives often follow the noun in Spanish (e.g., *una casa roja*, translated in English as *a house red*). Spanish nouns and adjectives—including their articles—also tend to be gendered, with an *-a* denoting feminine subjects and articles and an *-o* or no vowel ending denoting masculine subjects and articles (e.g., *a good friend* in Spanish is either *un**a** buen**a** amig**a*** if female or *un buen amig**o*** if male). English nouns and adjectives do not generally specify genders, so the same noun and adjective can be used to describe a subject regardless of gender identity (e.g., *a good friend* is gender neutral).

There also are differences in the ways sentence subjects are used and represented. For both languages, there are rules for subject-verb agreement in that verbs are conjugated based on the subject of the sentence and the verb tense. In English, sentences must contain a noun or pronoun subject and follow a subject-verb-object structure.

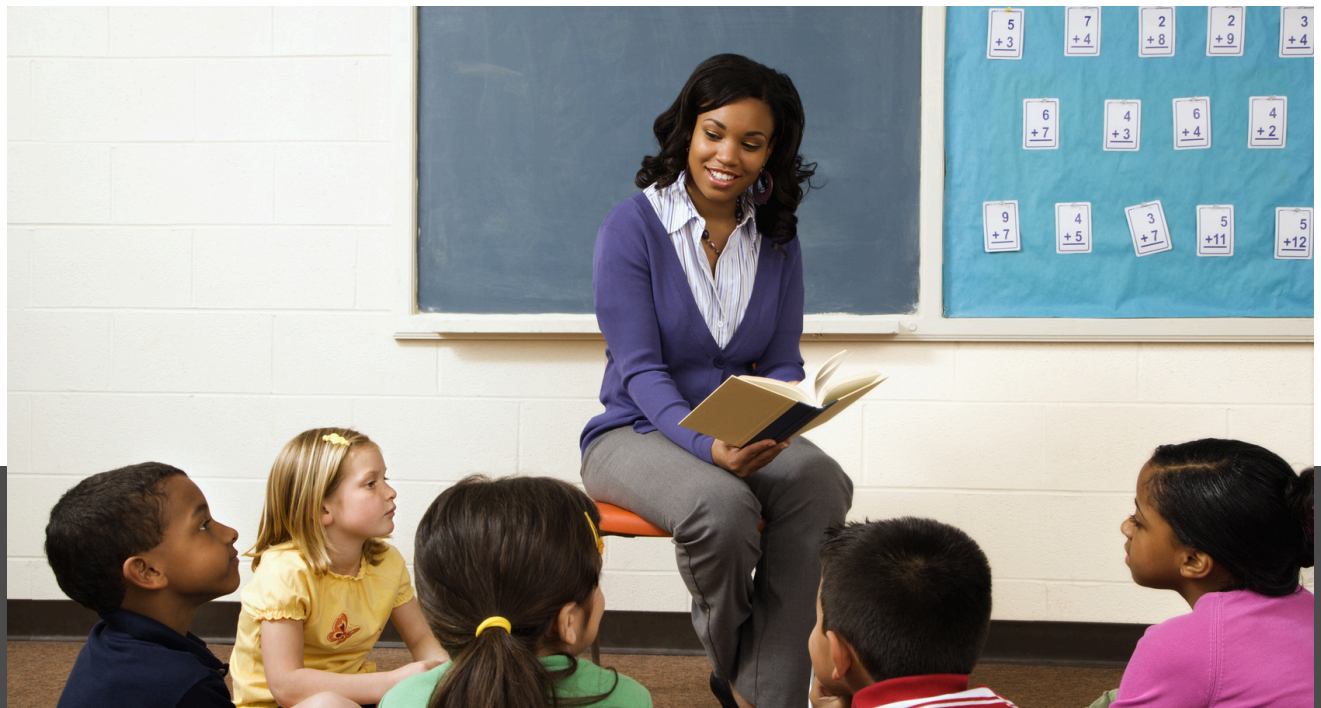
However, stating the subject of a sentence in Spanish is not always necessary because Spanish verbs conjugate in ways that indicate the subject (King, 2023). The following examples demonstrate the presence of the subject in English and the absence of the subject in the same sentence written in Spanish:

*I want coffee. = Quiero café.*
*You want coffee. = Quieres café.*
*We want coffee. = Queremos café.*
*They want coffee. = Quieren café.*

In each of the examples, the Spanish verb *querer* is conjugated based on the subject of the sentence, eliminating the need for the subject to be stated separately as it is in the English sentences.

Other distinctive differences between Spanish and English that could present challenges for Spanish-dominant students learning English include the use of possessive nouns and contractions. In Spanish, there are no possessive nouns (e.g., *the dog's ears*; King, 2023). Instead, possession is conveyed with a prepositional phrase (e.g., *las orejas del* [*de el*] *perro*, translated in English as *the ears of the dog*). In addition, popular English contractions (e.g., *we'll*, *I'm*, *don't*, *shouldn't*) are not utilized in the Spanish language. Often this is because the pronoun is implied in the verb or because the negation precedes or replaces the verb (e.g., *don't* is simply *no* in Spanish; *shouldn't* is *no debería* in Spanish).

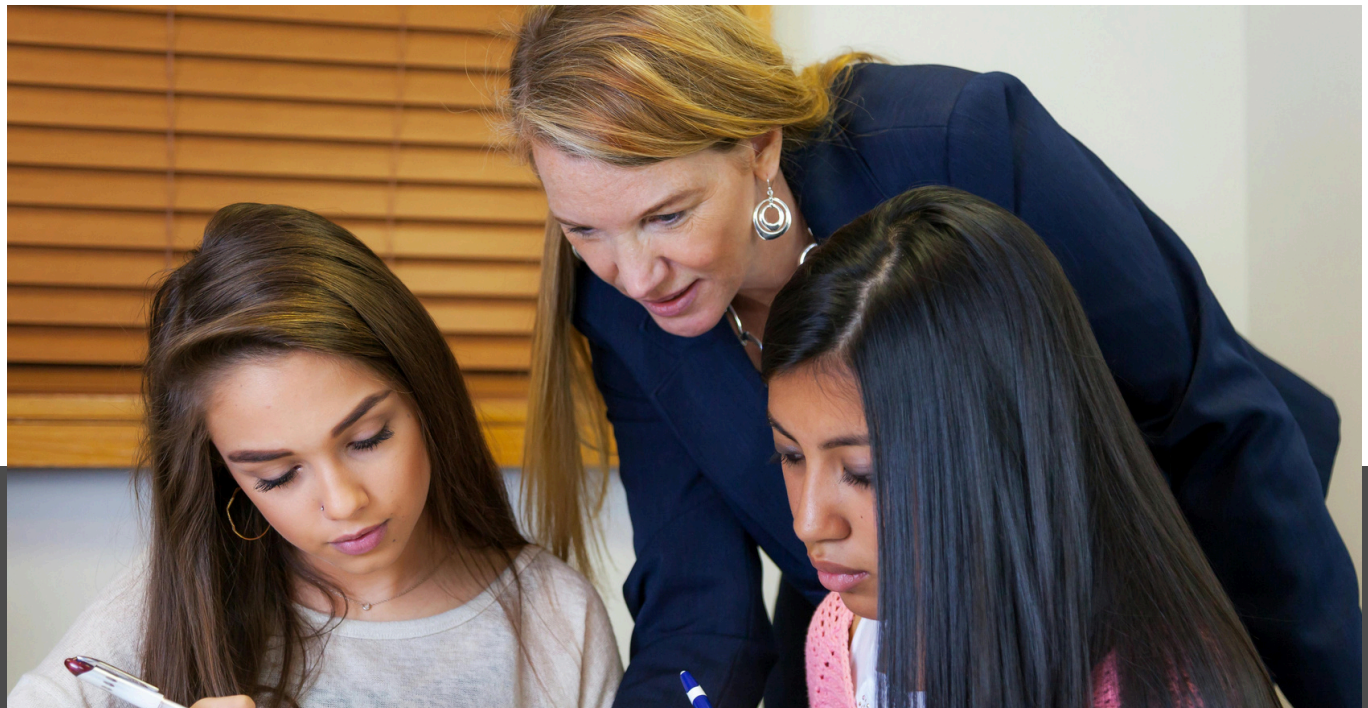
Teachers in literacy classrooms can support emergent bilinguals by offering additional support with explicit instruction in these distinctions. Additional scaffolding and instruction centered on English sentence structure, noun-adjective relationships, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, possessive nouns, contractions, and inflectional endings as part of the overall language arts instruction will be particularly beneficial for emergent bilinguals.



## 3. WRITING MECHANICS

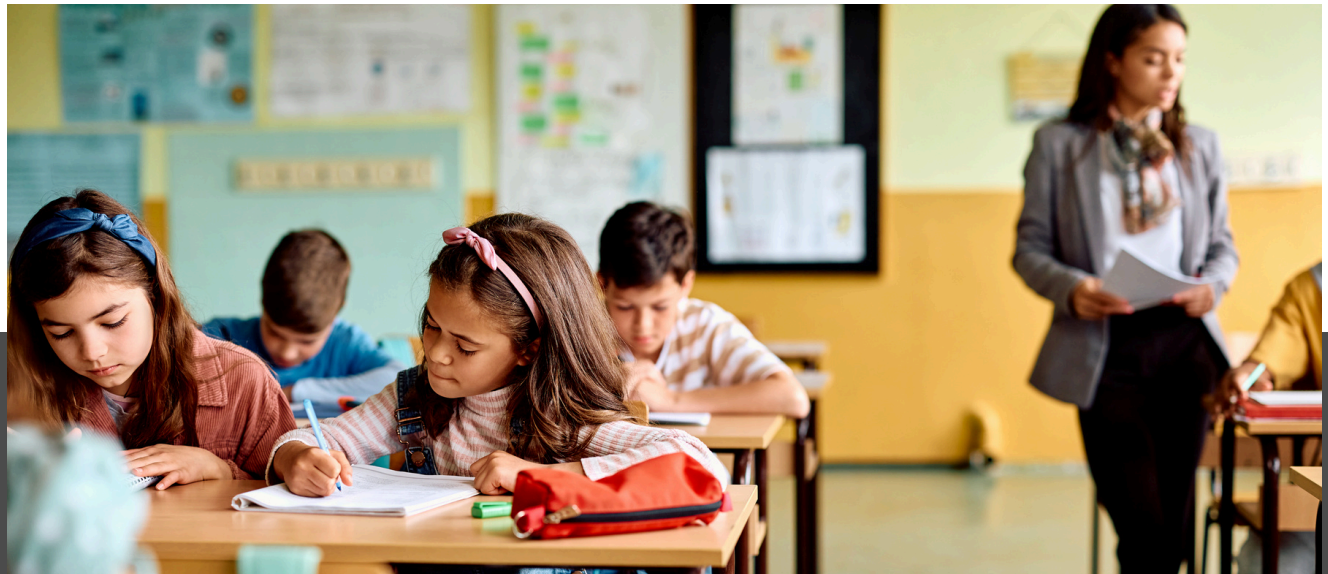
In addition to differences in the structure of the two languages, Spanish and English have some dissimilarities in mechanics that can affect reading comprehension and writing in English for students learning the language. For example, Spanish does not capitalize all nouns considered to be proper in English such as days of the week, months, and languages (King, 2023). *Monday* in Spanish is written as *lunes* and not capitalized. The same is true for the word *October* (written as *octubre*) and *Spanish* (written as *español*). To help emergent bilinguals recognize proper nouns and not spend their efforts trying to decode them, teachers can explain that capitalized words in the middle of sentences are likely referring to the specific names of people, places, months, days, or titles (Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018).

Instruction also can make explicit that Spanish and English apply question marks and exclamation points differently when including them as part of written text. For example, *How beautiful!* in Spanish would be written as *¡Qué bonita!* with an inverted exclamation point at the beginning of the sentence. Similarly, *How are you?* in Spanish would be written *¿Cómo estás?*.



## 4. VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is a key component of language and reading comprehension (Ramírez et al., 2013). Among Spanish-English emergent bilingual students, some scholars have found that vocabulary knowledge in both languages can predict young students' academic English proficiency and reading comprehension outcomes (Hwang et al., 2019) as well as their English vocabulary development (Kelley et al., 2015). To support students in learning new words, explicit instruction for Spanish-English emergent bilinguals should involve providing direct, focused instruction on targeted word meanings as well as multiple strategies for inferring the meanings of unknown words, such as analyzing word parts and recognizing shared cognates (Gallagher et al., 2019). Spanish and English share many cognates, or words with identical or similar pronunciations, spellings, and meanings in the two languages (e.g., *family* and *familia*; Marks, 2022). Many of these shared cognates are found in academic vocabulary (Hout et al., 2023). Cognates can facilitate transfer of young emergent bilingual students' vocabulary knowledge, suggesting that having knowledge of shared cognates could enhance emergent bilingual students' recognition of English words (Marks, Labotka et al., 2022; Marks, Sun et al., 2022).



Teachers who are fluent or semi-fluent in both languages can take instruction even further by pointing out shared cognates during read alouds or when encountering new academic vocabulary and connecting the vocabulary in English to the similar words in Spanish (e.g., *energy* and *energía*). Scholars point out that it also can be beneficial to teach false cognates, or words that have similar pronunciations and spellings but different meanings (e.g., *exit* and *éxito*), in order to prevent confusion (Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018).

Sometimes, the cognates are not whole words but meaningful parts of the words known as morphemes such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Teaching English root words and affixes commonly are a part of states' English Language Arts standards (e.g., Colorado Department of Education, 2020; Oregon Department of Education, 2019; Tennessee Department of Education, 2017) and provide students with tools for identifying what they already know and understand within English words (Hernandéz et al., 2016). That is, learning morphemes enables students to deduce the meaning of an unfamiliar word (Kuo et al., 2015; Marks, Labotka et al., 2022).

Leveraging Spanish-speaking students' knowledge of Spanish words and word parts when learning English vocabulary not only provides a scaffold, but also validates students' linguistic backgrounds and brings to light the value of being multilingual (Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018). Building on students' funds of knowledge offers an assets-based approach to literacy instruction, rather than a deficit approach that focuses on students' gaps in English language knowledge (Hernandéz et al., 2016).

## 5. OPPORTUNITIES TO READ, WRITE, AND SPEAK

In addition to explicit instruction, strategies for learning specific elements of English, and the ways in which English elements are similar to or different from Spanish, there are some general supports and practices teachers can employ when working with emergent bilinguals. Scholars recommend providing students with multiple contexts for using new English words and plenty of opportunities to speak, read, listen, and write (August et al., 2016; Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018). In particular, students benefit from participating in academic conversations where they can utilize newly learned vocabulary and practice speaking in English (Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018). Providing scaffolds in the form of images, explicit clarifications, decoding support, and translation dictionaries or glossaries can encourage students to participate in conversations (Johnson, 2019). Students also benefit from teachers' efforts to build background knowledge when presenting new content (Staehr Fenner & Snyder, 2018). For example, teachers can present emergent bilinguals with visuals, videos, and discussions that build knowledge before introducing new content. Then, they can provide students with opportunities to brainstorm and engage in partner talks to activate background knowledge they already possess.

Finally, it is useful for educators to model the correct use of English and read aloud often to students (August et al., 2018). Spanish-English dual-language books, or books written in two different languages (Domke, 2020), can be particularly valuable for supporting emergent bilingual students because they often display the text with both languages side-by-side on one or separate pages. This format provides students with a means of referencing, translating, and making comparisons between languages as they read (Domke, 2020; Semingson et al., 2015). Scholars posit that, when bilingual students are reading dual-language books, they can transfer knowledge and literacy skills across languages (e.g., decoding and meaning-making strategies) to make sense of unfamiliar text and build vocabulary (Semingson et al., 2015). Thus, these books help to build literacy in both languages.

## CONCLUSION

Despite having some differences, Spanish and English share similarities that can be leveraged to support students' language learning. Those who come into the classroom already literate or developing in areas of Spanish can carry over many of these learned skills to reading and writing in English (Kelley et al., 2015). Teachers who know the differences in the two languages will better understand the various challenges their Spanish-English students may have when reading, speaking, and writing and can focus on providing additional support for the parts of English that are most unfamiliar or likely to be most difficult to students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. This support can be built into whole-group instruction or incorporated into small-group instruction to reinforce concepts being taught to the whole group. With proper preparation, teachers can build upon strengths of students' linguistic repertoires in order to create an assets-based approach that is tailored to emergent bilinguals' unique learning needs.

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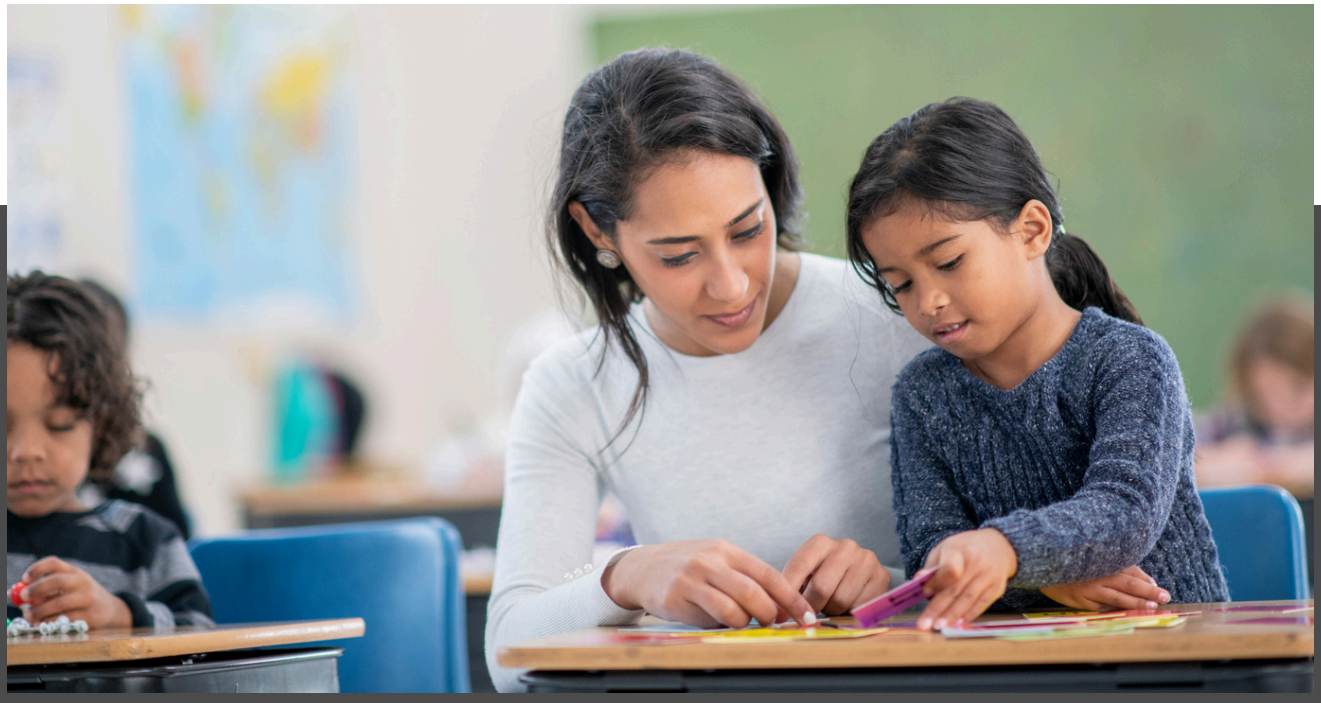

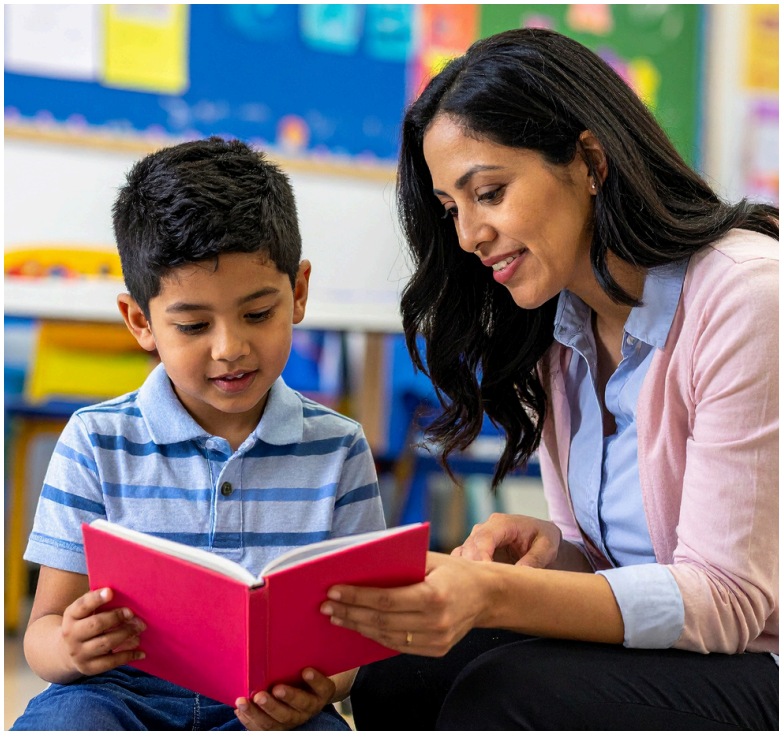

**Suggested Citation**: Maples, A. (2026). *English language and literacy strategies for engaging Spanish-English emergent bilingual students*. https://trrc.utk.edu/resources/strategies-spanish-english-students



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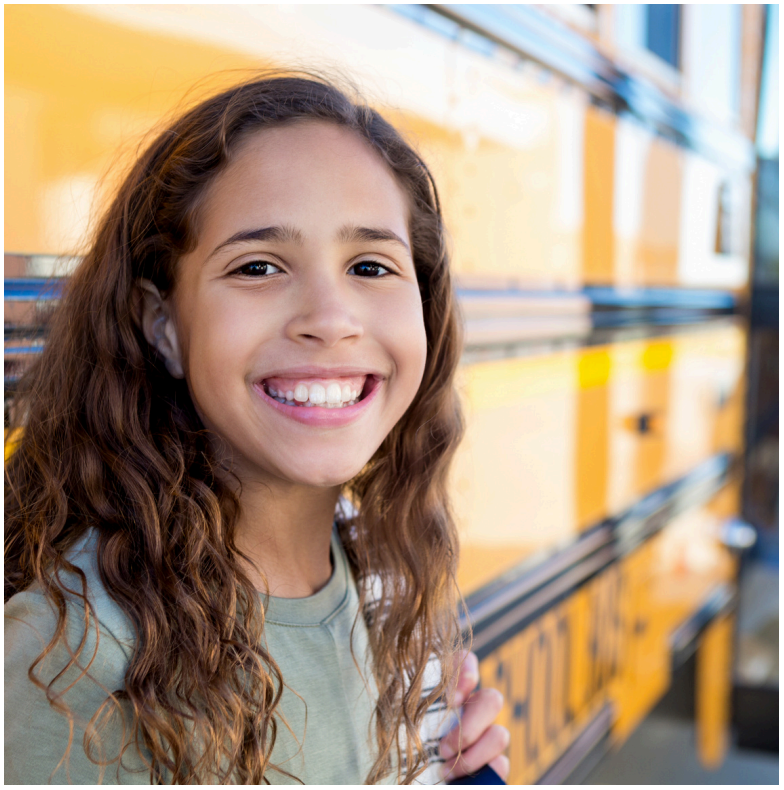

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