Early Childhood Research Quarterly 27 (2012) 1–20

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Early Childhood Research Quarterly

# Predictors and outcomes of early versus later English language proficiency among English language learners

Tamara Halle*, Elizabeth Hair, Laura Wandner, Michelle McNamara, Nina Chien

*Child Trends, Washington, DC, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 10 August 2009
Received in revised form 19 July 2011
Accepted 23 July 2011

*Keywords:*
English language learners
English proficiency
School readiness
Developmental trajectories

ABSTRACT

The development of English language learners (ELLs) was explored from kindergarten through eighth grade within a nationally representative sample of first-time kindergartners ($N = 19{,}890$). Growth curve analyses indicated that, compared to native English speakers, ELLs were rated by teachers more favorably on approaches to learning, self-control, and externalizing behaviors in kindergarten and generally continued to grow in a positive direction on these social/behavioral outcomes at a steeper rate compared to their native English-speaking peers, holding other factors constant. Differences in reading and math achievement between ELLs and native English speakers varied based on the grade at which English proficiency is attained. Specifically, ELLs who were proficient in English by kindergarten entry kept pace with native English speakers in both reading and math initially and over time; ELLs who were proficient by first grade had modest gaps in reading and math achievement compared to native English speakers that closed narrowly or persisted over time; and ELLs who were not proficient by first grade had the largest initial gaps in reading and math achievement compared to native speakers but the gap narrowed over time in reading and grew over time in math. Among those whose home language is not English, acquiring English proficiency by kindergarten entry was associated with better cognitive and behavioral outcomes through eighth grade compared to taking longer to achieve proficiency. Multinomial regression analyses indicated that child, family, and school characteristics predict achieving English proficiency by kindergarten entry compared to achieving proficiency later. Results are discussed in terms of policies and practices that can support ELL children's growth and development.



## 1. Introduction

English language learners (ELLs) can be defined as individuals in an English-speaking environment whose native language is not English. As noted in Espinosa (2007), other common terms for ELL students are *linguistic minority students* or *linguistically diverse students*. More recently, the term *dual language learner* has been used to describe young language-learning children who are learning to speak their home language as well as at least one other language at the same time (Castro, Espinosa, & Paez, 2011). ELL children are an important, and the fastest growing, segment of the student population in the United States (Wolf et al., 2008). The ELL student population has increased by more than 60% within a 10-year period (1994–2005), whereas the total growth in the K-12 student population within the same 10-year period was only 2% (Wolf et al., 2008). During the 2003–2004 school year, an estimated 5.5 million ELL students enrolled in United States' schools (Lazarin, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey, one in five school-age children (21%) spoke a language other than English at home; of these, almost one in four (24%) had difficulty speaking English (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009). In 2007, 6% of school-age children lived in families that are considered "linguistically isolated," meaning that no person age fourteen and older is fluent in English (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009).

Although English is not their native language, English language learners are not all limited in their proficiency of spoken and written English. For example, many children from immigrant families are proficient in English (Capps et al., 2005; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2006; Shin & Bruno, 2003). However, consistent with the overall increase in ELL children in the U.S., the number of "limited English proficient" (LEP) students has also shown an increase over the past two decades (Collier, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, 2004a). For example, in 2001–2002, approximately 3.8 million children in the nation's public schools were estimated to be limited in English proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), compared to approximately 2 million in 1993–1994 (National Center

* Corresponding author at: Child Trends, 4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20008, United States. Tel.: +1 202 572 6034; fax: +1 202 362 5533.
*E-mail address:* thalle@childtrends.org (T. Halle).

0885-2006/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.07.004

for Education Statistics, 2004a). More recent estimates from the 2003 to 2004 school year indicate that the percentage of children in U.S. schools who were not proficient in English was 11%, and 51% of all schools reported serving LEP students during this time period (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006).

Improving the English language and literacy skills of all children, but especially ELL children, is a major concern for educational policy makers, as reflected in federal initiatives such as *Good Start, Grow Smart* and the No Child Left Behind Act, as well as state- and local-level early learning initiatives and instructional policies (Abedi, 2007; Child Care Bureau, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Consequently, it is important to understand what factors might support the development of young English language learners, including the development of English proficiency.

This paper presents a study focused on the development of ELL elementary school students. The study compares the developmental trajectories of ELL students and their native English-speaking peers in a nationally-representative, longitudinal sample of first-time kindergartners, focusing specifically on cognitive and behavioral outcomes from kindergarten through eighth grade. The study also explores whether there are differential developmental trajectories on cognitive and behavioral outcomes through eighth grade among ELL students based on the grade at which English proficiency is achieved during elementary school. In addition, this study also explores the factors that predict English proficiency among children whose home language is not English. The findings from this study may inform policy and practice in the early education of ELL children.

### 1.1. Characteristics of the ELL population

The population of English language learners is linguistically, culturally, and socially diverse. The most widely spoken foreign language in the United States in 2000 was Spanish, followed in order by Chinese, French, German, and Tagalog (Shin & Bruno, 2003). Nevertheless, Spanish appears to be the most dominant language spoken by ELL students in U.S. schools. In addition, 71% of all ELL elementary school children were identified as Latino as of the year 2000 (Capps et al., 2005).

Dual language learning in the early years has many benefits. Being a fluent multilingual speaker opens up opportunities that are not available to monolinguals, especially in the increasingly global economy. In addition, maintaining one's home language while learning a second language helps to support cultural identity and boost both self-concept and metalinguistic abilities (Bialystock, 2001; Espinosa, 2006; Oller & Jarmulowicz, 2007). In fact, ELL children in bilingual preschool programs learn English faster than their peers who stay at home while at the same time maintain their native language, which has psychosocial and academic benefits (Espinosa, 2007; Rodriguez, Diaz, Duran, & Espinosa, 1995; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999).

Young ELL children tend to lag behind monolinguals in academic tasks (Oller & Jarmulowicz, 2007) and are at-risk for losing fluency in their home language, which is linked to poor academic outcomes (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). ELL children may be at greater risk for low academic achievement not only due to language difficulties, but also because of family circumstances. Some of the most severe problems facing ELL children are poverty, low parental education, and, among those who are children of immigrants, issues related to their parents' legal status (Capps et al., 2005; Dinan, 2006). In the year 2000, 68% of ELL elementary school students were considered low-income, and 35% had parents with less than a high school degree (Capps et al., 2005; The Urban Institute, 2006). Of the various ethnic groups that comprise the ELL student population, Latino children face the most severe challenges in that they are the most likely to live in poverty and to have the least-educated parents (Capps et al., 2005; Larsen, 2004; Lopez & Cole, 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, children who speak Spanish at home comprise the largest proportion of LEP students (76% in the year 2000) (Capps et al., 2005). It is therefore important to control for family factors such as income and parent education, as well as school factors such as proportion of LEP students, in order to determine the effects of ELL status on child outcomes.

There are individual differences in the rate of second-language acquisition among ELL children (Tabors & Snow, 2002). Factors that may influence second language acquisition include personality characteristics, immigrant status, socioeconomic status, how well the child has developed oral and written language skills in the first language, unique features of the second language, and the degree to which the first and second language differ (Genesee, Geva, Dressler, & Kamil, 2006). In addition, the number of years in the United States and the degree to which the home and school environments are similar with regard to their language and literacy experiences may also play a role (Francis & Rivera, 2007; Rueda, August, & Goldberg, 2006). Thus, second-language learning is a product of complex interactions between family and child characteristics as well as school policies, and classroom and teacher characteristics (Garcia & Jensen, 2007). Because of these complex relationships, research should examine the nature of within-group variability in language and literacy outcomes for ELL students based on home and school characteristics.

### 1.2. School readiness among English language learners

Regardless of home language or level of English language proficiency, children who grow up in low-income households and children whose parents have low levels of education are at a greater risk for low academic achievement (Dinan, 2006; Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006; Lopez & Cole, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a, 2004b; The Urban Institute, 2006). ELL children are among those at greater risk for reading and math difficulties in elementary and middle school, high school dropout, and low college attendance (Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, 1998; Espinosa, 2007; Fitzgerald, 1993; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Current research is insufficient to predict the effect of ELL status on behavioral outcomes. However, there is some evidence to suggest that children whose home language is not English tend to have a developmental profile at kindergarten entry that is characterized by strengths in the social–emotional domain (Hair et al., 2006). Because of the high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage among ELL children, it is important to disentangle the effects of English language proficiency from other potential influences on academic and behavioral outcomes among ELL children (Espinosa, 2010).

### 1.3. English proficiency among ELL children

The term "language proficiency" has been defined in different ways by different researchers. Many distinguish between the skills that govern oral fluency from those associated with successful functioning in an academic environment. For example, Cummins (2000) uses the terms Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency to distinguish these two aspects of language proficiency (see also Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000 for a similar dichotomous distinction). Other researchers, such as MacSwan and Pray (2005), view proficiency as encompassing all aspects of language development, including phonology (pronunciation), morphology (word formation), the principles of oral discourse including semantics (word meanings), the rules that govern syntax (word order), and pragmatics (the social uses of language). Bailey (2007) presents a more