



Preschoolers' English vocabulary development: The influence of language proficiency and at-risk factors



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ABSTRACT

A persistent achievement gap, particularly in language development, exists between English language learners and their peers prior to kindergarten entry (Fuller et al., 2009) and throughout the formal education years (García & Frede, 2010). While language experience is known to contribute to this gap, the impact of additional risk factors, whether indexed cumulatively or individually, is not well understood. This longitudinal study investigates preschool children's ($n = 204$) patterns of English receptive vocabulary development by the level of English language proficiency designation at preschool entry, as well as by the influence of cumulative and individual risk factors drawn from 29 child, parent, and context variables. Our results show that, although there was positive vocabulary growth for all preschoolers, there was a more adverse impact of cumulative and individual risk for children designated as less versus more English proficient. Implications for policy, practice, and further research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The achievement gap is well documented between children from non-native English speaking homes, known as English language learners (ELLs), and children from low-income homes, as compared to their peers who are monolingual and from middle- and upper-income homes, respectively (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006). For ELLs, learning two or more languages concurrently is not solely a risk factor for academic difficulties (De Houwer, 1999; Snow, 1992). However, low socio-economic status hinders child development in academic, neurocognitive, socio-emotional, and physical health domains (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Farah et al., 2006), with the greatest impact on children in early childhood (Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010; Hernandez, 2004). This is of grave concern as Latino children from Spanish-speaking homes—the largest and fastest growing segment of the U.S. population (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011)—are now the largest single group of poor children in the U.S. (López & Velasco, 2011). A growing body of empirical research shows that the achievement gap, particularly in vocabulary development, between Spanish-speaking ELLs from low-income homes and their peers is already evident prior to kindergarten entry (Fuller et al., 2009; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011a) and continues at every level of the education system (August & Shanahan, 2006; García &

Frede, 2010). In light of the well-established link between vocabulary and overall academic achievement (e.g., Anderson & Freebody, 1983; Snow & Kim, 2007), attending to the vocabulary needs of the young Latino population—particularly those from low-income homes—is urgent (García & Frede, 2010; García & Jensen, 2009; National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

Despite the consistent finding that poverty is associated with the low academic achievement of many ELLs, we know very little about the influence of other factors on the vocabulary gap during the preschool years, whether these factors are considered alone or in combination, they are directly relevant to the child, or they are indirectly relevant to the child via parents or context. Previous research has used cumulative risk models to demonstrate that vulnerable populations are disproportionately burdened by multiple risk factors (Burchinal, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008; Cadima, McWilliam, & Leal, 2010; Garnezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1979). Though cumulative risk research primarily has been conducted with monolingual populations, some work shows that children from immigrant families are more than twice as likely to experience multiple risk factors than those from native-born families (Hernandez, 2004). While it seems intuitive that English language proficiency contributes to the noted vocabulary achievement gap between ELLs and their non-ELL peers, to our knowledge, the role of cumulative risk for vocabulary development in preschool-age ELLs has yet to be studied.

Our longitudinal study investigated the English vocabulary development of children enrolled in an English-only state-funded preschool program over the course of the academic year. The influence of children's

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English language proficiency status and risk factors at preschool entry on vocabulary was explored. By following the vocabulary development of children from both monolingual English and Spanish–English bilingual homes, this study provides insight into factors that shape the English vocabulary development of young children, above and beyond the role of initial English language proficiency designation, which is typically the dominant focus of research with respect to ELLs.

1.1. Language proficiency designation and vocabulary in ELLs

English language proficiency assessments are used to ensure that schools and districts are held accountable for ELL progress toward achieving English language proficiency. The assessments are used to identify language proficiency designations, thereby assisting schools in the identification of appropriate classroom placements for students. Language proficiency encompasses diverse components, such as listening comprehension, grammatical skills, vocabulary, and oral retelling skills. The *IDEA Oral Language Proficiency Tests (IPT)*, available for students in preschool through grade 12, is an example of a measure used to determine students' overall English language proficiency status. The IPT includes items across language constructs that are designed for screening purposes. Therefore, a student's language proficiency designation represents a *general proxy* for language proficiency. In contrast, measures of vocabulary, for example, represent proficiency within a *specific* language component. Differentiating between English language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge is of central importance in considering children from non-native English speaking homes, some of whom are considered ELLs, as mounting evidence points to their generally depressed vocabulary levels beginning in early childhood and beyond (August & Shanahan, 2006; Fuller et al., 2009; García & Frede, 2010; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2011a).

1.2. Risk factors

While investigations to date have examined the impact of risk factors, cumulatively, in selected populations, the potential influence of cumulative risk factors for ELLs remains underspecified. Cumulative risk models, considered to be important for understanding how children respond to stressful factors in their lives (Rutter, 1979), have been examined in low-income European–American infants (Burchinal et al., 2008), Portuguese Caucasian preschoolers (Cadima et al., 2010), and children from one of the three stressful contexts (urban settings; having had a stressful early health defect; children with physical disabilities transitioning to mainstream schooling) (Garmezy et al., 1984). Further evidence supporting cumulative risk investigations comes from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ACE study, which points to the lifelong impact of adverse childhood experiences on health and social outcomes, with graded increases associated with more risk factors (Felitti et al., 1998). Evidence suggests that children from low-income homes show a cumulative negative impact on preschool language skills based on risk factors drawn from maternal, paternal, and birth data (Stanton-Chapman, Chapman, Kaiser, & Hancock, 2004). Thus, while studies have used cumulative risk models in the past, an integrative evaluation of ELLs remains a critically under-investigated area. Furthermore, employing longitudinal designs to study the interaction between a child's development and relevant contextual factors offers the ability to document significant factors and the interactions that influence risk status. Currently, few studies have explored the impact of multiple risk factors, but evidence shows that lower income status is associated with more co-occurring risk factors (Evans & Kim, 2010). The degree to which ELLs may be disadvantaged for vocabulary development may be exacerbated by cumulative risks related to income status and more broadly by child, parent, and context risk factors; it is critical to study their impacts in this understudied population early in development.

To better understand how the amount and type of risk affect outcomes, the contributions of cumulative and individual risk factors must be evaluated (Burchinal, Roberts, Hooper, & Zeisel, 2000). Such work is sorely needed in relation to ELLs and their vocabulary development if we are to gain a more nuanced understanding of factors that influence their vocabulary development above and beyond English language proficiency.

The purpose of this longitudinal study, conducted in English-only classrooms, was to investigate preschool children's vocabulary development over the course of the preschool year and study the impact of and possible interactions with additional risk factors. Potential differential growth patterns due to children's English language proficiency designation at preschool entry and the extent of applicable risk factors drawn from child, parent, and context levels were explored. We asked:

- 1) What are the patterns of English vocabulary development among preschool children from low-income homes, compared to national monolingual norms, and to what extent do they vary by English language proficiency designation at preschool entry?
- 2) Accounting for an initial level of English language proficiency, what is the influence of cumulative risk (i.e., total number of risk factors) on English vocabulary initial levels and rates of growth?
- 3) Accounting for an initial level of English language proficiency, which individual risk factors (e.g., low parental education level, multiple families in the home) influence English vocabulary initial levels and rates of growth?

2. Method

2.1. Study design

All children ($n = 204$) enrolled in English-only classrooms at a public, half-day preschool program in Illinois during the 2011–2012 academic year participated in this study. Participating children were followed for the duration of their preschool year. There was minimal attrition from the cohort over time. Of the 204 students who participated in the fall, all were assessed in the winter (0% attrition) while 14 were not assessed in spring ($n = 190$; 7% attrition).

2.2. Participants

Demographic data was provided by the district. All children were born in the U.S. ($n = 204$) whereas 126 (62%) mothers were born in the U.S. mainland, 70 (34%) were born in Mexico, and eight (4%) were born outside of the U.S. mainland and in other countries. Of the fathers with country of birth information available ($n = 162$), 74 (46%) were born in the U.S. mainland, 83 (51%) were born in Mexico, and five (3%) were born outside of the U.S. mainland and in other countries. The primary home language was Spanish for 126 families (62%) and English for 78 families (38%). Of the families who completed an application for free or reduced lunch ($n = 166$), 90% qualified (78% for free and 11% for reduced lunch). Thus, as a group, the children are all U.S.-born from predominantly low-income households.

2.3. Procedure

At-risk status was determined via the preschool screening process, English language proficiency designation was determined via direct assessment at preschool entry, and receptive vocabulary was assessed one-on-one at three time points: fall, winter, and spring of the preschool year (see Table 1 for testing ages). Lead teachers ($n = 13$), trained by the first author on the administration of the vocabulary assessment during 2 separate, 3-hour training sessions, administered the assessments in a quiet room during each 2-week testing period.

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