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## Background and Achievement of English Language Learners With Different Levels of English Proficiency in Dual Language Programs

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## Background and Achievement of ELLs with Different Levels of English Proficiency in Dual Language Programs

### Purpose

ELL students are at risk for underachievement and school drop out, yet there is little information about various subgroups of ELLs to determine who is successful and why. Most educational research is narrowly focused on policy-related topics about which programs are most effective for at-risk students, and does not address issues of bilingualism or background variables that may be particularly pertinent for many ELLs.

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the background factors and language proficiency and reading achievement outcomes of ELL students who were disaggregated according to English language proficiency, that is, students who had attained one of four English language proficiency levels by grade 4-8. More specifically, this study will determine whether ELLs of different English proficiency levels differ significantly in: 1) background factors (parent education, SES); 2) school factors (dual language program model, school SES); and 3) language proficiency and achievement outcomes at program entry (grades K-2), the grade at which English reading was introduced (grade 3), and for the current grade level.

### Perspectives

ELLs are currently the fastest growing population in the U.S. (Clewel, Cosentino de Cohen, & Murray, 2007), with the number of ELLs expected to increase another 50% by 2025 (Passel, 2007). Hispanic children represent the largest number of children who speak English with difficulty and are the fastest growing group. Nationally, the academic performance of ELL students continues to be considerably below majority norms (e.g., California Department of Education, 2010; Fry, 2007; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2011). For example, Olsen (2010) reported that half to three-quarters of secondary ELLs are long-term ELLs, despite being educated in English for 8+ years in US schools.

In general, most research on English language learners has been more narrowly focused on which educational programs and interventions best meet the needs of these students (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006). There is a dearth of research that provides an understanding of the diversity of Spanish-background ELL students, how they achieve, and what factors are associated with their educational success or failure.

Dual language programs are designed to provide a high quality educational experience for both language minority and language majority students and to promote higher levels of academic achievement (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). While research on these programs show that they promote bilingualism, biliteracy and achievement in ELLs, there has been insufficient analysis on distinct groups of ELL participants.

## Methods

The sample comprised 899 4<sup>th</sup>- through 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students, who had been participating in a dual language program for at least the last four years. These students were currently enrolled in a 90:10 or 50:50 dual language program at one of 11 public elementary or middle schools in California. In both programs, ELLs learned to read first in Spanish, and added on formal English reading in grade 3.

About half of the students were males (51%) and half were females (49%). Half (50%) of the students were in grades 4-5, and the remainder (50%) were in grades 6-8. All of the students were native Spanish speakers and had entered school as an English Language Learner (ELL). For the purposes of this study, students were classified into four groups on the basis of their proficiency in English at the time of this study. English proficiency was determined by the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), which categorizes students into one of five proficiency groups (Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, Advanced). In addition, ELL students who have been evaluated as English proficient according to their scores on the CELDT are reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (FEP). Thus, the four groups of students are 1) Beg=Beginning/Early Intermediate (n=80); 2) Int=Intermediate (n=238); 3) Adv=Early Advanced/Advanced (n=276), and 4) FEP (n=305).

The great majority of students (86%) were low income, as measured by participation in the federal free/reduced price lunch program. In terms of parent education, about 41% of students had parents who had not completed high school, 25% of parents had a high school diploma, 20% had some college (including vocational training), 9% were college graduates, and 5% had completed graduate school or a professional degree.

Student achievement was assessed by examining the scale scores on the English Language Arts subtest of the **California Standards Test (CST)**, a criterion-referenced state assessment in English. The CST categorizes students into five classifications: Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient (at grade level), and Advanced (well above grade level). Students were also administered the **Aprenda**, a norm-referenced standardized achievement test that assesses reading achievement in Spanish. ELL students' language proficiency in English was assessed using the **California English Language Development Test (CELDT)**, which was developed by the State of California to fulfill the legal requirements of initially and annually testing English learners. The CELDT covers four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Test score data and background information were obtained from school personnel.

## Results

### English Language Proficiency

1. At current grade level:
  - a. The percentage of students who were at different English proficiency levels varied by grade level. Thus, as students moved up the grade levels, more students were proficient in English. Across the grade levels there was a higher percentage of students who reached the Early Advanced or Advanced levels and FEP level (from

- 43% in grade 4 to 82% in grades 7-8). These students were more likely to be proficient in English than their peers in the state who were mostly enrolled in English mainstream programs.
- b. Socio-economic status varied significantly across the four language proficiency groups, with 94% of Beg, 92% of Int, 88% of Adv, and 73% of FEP students low income ( $\chi^2(547) = 26.2, p < .001$ ).
  - c. Parent education also varied significantly across the four language proficiency groups ( $\chi^2(606) = 47.6, p < .001$ ). Far more Beg and Int than Adv or FEP students had parents with *less than* a high school education (54-56% of Beg and Int vs. 42% of Adv vs. 27% of FEP), or a *high school education or less* (76-79% of Beg or Int vs. 69% of Adv vs. 54% of FEP), and far more FEP than others had parents with at least a college degree (3-12% of ELL groups vs. 23% of FEP).
  - d. Students in the 90:10 program were significantly more likely to be Adv and FEP (68%) than students in the 50:50 program (48%), ( $\chi^2(899) = 54.8, p < .001$ ).
2. At program entry (grade K/1): According to a one-way ANOVA, language proficiency group was a highly significant main effect for English proficiency score at program entry [ $F(3,346) = 28.8, p < .001$ ]. Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Beg, but not Int; and Int outscored Beg students (FEP  $\underline{M}$ =461.1; Adv  $\underline{M}$ =408.9; Int  $\underline{M}$ =381.3; Beg  $\underline{M}$ =318.9).
  3. At grade 3: Language proficiency group was a highly significant main effect for English proficiency score at grade 3 [ $F(3,502) = 106.6, p < .001$ ]. Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Beg and Int; and Int outscored Beg students (FEP  $\underline{M}$ =505.5; Adv  $\underline{M}$ =478.0; Int  $\underline{M}$ =443.9; Beg  $\underline{M}$ =402.0).

### Reading Achievement in English and Spanish

1. English reading achievement at current grade level:
  - a. Student reading achievement in English was examined using the California Standards Test (proficient = score of 350). Across all proficiency groups (n=899), the overall mean ( $\underline{M}$ =335) was similar to the state average for ELL and FEP students ( $\underline{M}$ =339), though the state average included FEP students from all language and ethnic groups, many of whom had higher levels of education than the Hispanic parents here). Also, the overall mean was above the average for Latino students ( $\underline{M}$ =330) though many of these students are native English speakers, but did not reach the mean for *all* students (M=360). However, FEP students (M=367) closed the achievement gap, scoring close to the average for English monolingual students (M=371).
  - b. A 4 (language proficiency group) x 3 (parent education) factorial ANOVA was run to determine whether there would be significant main effects for parent education and language proficiency group. The findings indicate that both language proficiency

- group and parent education were highly significant main effects [ $F(3,594) = 43.8, p < .001$  for language proficiency group and  $F(2,594) = 5.6, p < .01$  for parent education], with no significant interaction. According to Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Int and Beg; and Int outscored Beg. Also, students of parents with High School or less scored significantly lower than students of parents with some college, who scored significantly lower than students of parents with college graduation. In looking at the parent education level High School or less, Beg, Int, Adv, and FEPs have mean scores of 277.8, 312.3, 342.8, and 357.3; for Some College, scores of 278.6, 321.0, 349.7, and 371.2; and for College Degree, 326.5, 318.9, 364.1, and 377.2.
- c. Students in the 90:10 program scored significantly higher than students in the 50:50 program ( $M=338.4$  vs.  $M=319.8$ ),  $t(707) = 3.1, p < .01$ ).
2. Spanish reading achievement at current grade level:
    - a. In examining reading achievement in Spanish, students achieved above grade level (Mean NCE = 60.8, Mean percentile = 69). According to the results from the 4 x 3 factorial ANOVA for Spanish reading, both language proficiency group and parent education were highly significant main effects [ $F(3,475) = 9.4, p < .001$  for language proficiency group and  $F(2,475) = 6.4, p < .01$  for parent education], with no significant interaction. Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Beg, but not Int; and Int outscored Beg students (FEP  $\underline{M}=68.0$ ; Adv  $\underline{M}=62.9$ ; Int  $\underline{M}=55.9$ ; Beg  $\underline{M}=41.8$ ).
    - b. Students in the 90:10 program scored significantly higher than students in the 50:50 program ( $M=59.0$  vs.  $M=52.4$ ),  $t(897) = 4.3, p < .001$ ).
  4. Spanish reading achievement at grade 3: According to a one-way ANOVA, language proficiency group was a highly significant main effect for Spanish reading NCE score at grade 3 [ $F(3,306) = 30.4, p < .001$ ]. Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Beg, but not Int; and Int outscored Beg students (FEP  $\underline{M}=77.3$ ; Adv  $\underline{M}=67.6$ ; Int  $\underline{M}=62.0$ ; Beg  $\underline{M}=51.8$ ).
  5. Spanish reading achievement at grade 1: Language proficiency group was a highly significant main effect for Spanish reading NCE score at grade 1 [ $F(3,152) = 15.3, p < .001$ ]. Scheffé post-hoc comparisons: FEPs outscored all other groups; Adv outscored Beg but not Int; and Int outscored Beg students (FEP  $\underline{M}=73.5$ ; Adv  $\underline{M}=70.6$ ; Int  $\underline{M}=63.3$ ; Beg  $\underline{M}=52.1$ ).

*[Tables and additional explanations of the results will be provided in the AERA paper.]*

### Significance

The current results show that overall ELL students who have participated in the dual language program: 1) are highly likely to be proficiency in English by grade 7 (82% proficient in

English), which is a higher level of English proficiency than ELL peers in the state; and 2) achieve slightly below to above grade level in English language arts (similar to or higher than statewide peer groups, though lower than English speakers) and slightly above grade level in Spanish reading. Thus, similar to other research, these students are developing proficiency in English, read at or above grade level in Spanish, and are moving toward grade level achievement in English reading.

However, the results clearly show that ELL students are not homogeneous, and students at different English language proficiency levels vary significantly in background factors (SES and parent education) and even differ significantly at program entry or by grade 1 in their English language proficiency and Spanish reading achievement. We will further discuss the importance of understanding these variations among students, which have important implications for the students' developmental trajectories.

The significantly greater performance in English language proficiency, English reading, and Spanish reading of the most bilingual subgroup (FEPs) suggests the importance of providing language arts instruction through both languages.

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