



English Language Learners in Early Childhood Education

Research Spotlight No. 3-2021



Editor's Note: This Research Spotlight reflects a selection of ICPSR studies and the literature analyzing the data in those studies, as of September 2021.

Introduction

The United States is becoming more and more linguistically diverse. According to [US Census Bureau information](#), in 2019, 22 percent of the US population aged five and above spoke a language other than English at home. Approximately 67.8 million members of the population spoke a language other than English, with 41 million speaking Spanish. Also, according to the [Urban Institute's calculation](#) of 2017 American Community Survey data, one-quarter of US children (over 18 million) have immigrant parents. Of these, 55 percent are bilingual while 14 percent have limited English proficiency.

With this growing trend in US demographics, language diversity is prevalent in early childhood classrooms. This significant growth in the number of non-English speaking children and the education system's need to support these populations has led scholars to trace children's academic achievements and behavioral development in such classrooms, beyond the traditional mainstream and English-only settings. As a result, multiple national and longitudinal studies collect data on language learning in early childhood education.

The following Research Spotlight highlights some of the data-related literature focused on early childhood education and the challenges that non-English speaking children may encounter, using two datasets maintained and distributed by the [Child and Family Data Archive](#) at ICPSR. This Spotlight contains two main sections: 1) academic performance, and 2) socio-emotional development in English language learner students.

Academic performance of English Language Learner students (ELLs)

Utilizing a nationally representative sample from the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten \(ECLS-K\) 1998-1999](#), [Cho \(2012\)](#) examined the academic performance of kindergarteners and first graders and the likely effects of having ELL peers in their classrooms. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) provides extensive information about children's knowledge, skills, and socioemotional development. Cho found that having ELL classmates, whose primary language is not English, is negatively associated with the reading test scores of non-ELLs, especially in girls and low-income students. The author mentioned a few existing assumptions about the cause, such as having ELL students slows class progression, or teachers' workload in mixed classes is heavier than classes with English-only students. However, the author believes that more research is needed in this area. Interestingly, the study did not find any negative impact on non-ELLs' mathematical skills and that might be because numbers and symbols are more universally understood, so ELL students face fewer challenges in English-only classrooms.

Utilizing four waves of the ECLS-K 1998-1999, [Chang \(2012\)](#) studied the growth trajectory of the academic performance of dual language-speaking learners (defined by the author as "those who spoke a language other than English at home but did not show difficulty with spoken

English”) and ELLs. Chang specifically focused on racial minorities and economically disadvantaged students who participated in all-day kindergarten programs. When analyzing data from the ECLS-kindergarten, first grade, third grade, and fifth grade students, Chang found that with all-day kindergarten, Hispanic dual-language students made a significant gain in reading improvement, and they narrowed the achievement gap with the Hispanic English-only students. Moreover, the study found a significant effect of all-day kindergarten programs on Black DLLs, and on Asian DLL and ELL students from low socioeconomic status in the growth rate of performance. The study also revealed that the socioeconomic status of children is one of the most powerful predictors of student academic achievement in all racial and language groups.

[Choi et al. \(2018\)](#) studied the academic developmental path of children with different levels of language proficiency by analyzing data from the [Head Start Family and Child Experiences \(FACES\) study](#). According to the [Office of Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start](#), the Head Start program provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from low-income families. [Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey \(FACES\)](#) is an ongoing, longitudinal study that provides nationally representative and reliable information on the characteristics and experience of Head Start participants, including children (learners), families, and staff. Using [FACES 2009](#), Choi et al. demonstrated that bilingual learners (English-Spanish) who entered Head Start programs with English proficiency, showed a similar developmental path in mathematics and vocabulary to those of monolingual learners. However, emergent bilingual learners with limited English proficiency appeared to have the lowest baseline skills in vocabulary and math. The study illustrated that the initial gaps in mathematics were reduced by kindergarten, however, initial vocabulary gaps persisted over time.

Due to the demographic changes occurring in the US, and the increased number of non-English speaking children, scholars also are studying children’s literacy skills development, such as vocabulary in classrooms with bilingual children. For example, [Hindman and Wasik \(2015\)](#) examined the English and Spanish vocabulary skills in Head Start children from the fall of the year of entry into the program in 2006 until the end of that academic year in Spring 2007. Using [FACES 2006](#), the authors found that Spanish-speaking dual language learners (DLLs) in

Head Start begin with low receptive vocabulary in Spanish and even lower in English. However, they make “modest gains” in English while in the program. The study revealed that the prevalence of English or Spanish in the household, as well as the quality of the language of classroom instruction, has significant impacts on children's initial and end-of-year vocabulary skills.

[Garcia \(2018\)](#) used FACES 2009 to investigate associations between the classroom language context and vocabulary skills in dual language learners. The author reviewed the language used for instructional activities and categorized the classrooms into English only, a mix of English and Spanish, and mostly Spanish settings. Her analysis showed that English vocabulary scores in children in English-only and a mix of English and Spanish were almost the same. However, children in mostly Spanish classrooms had significantly lower English scores compared to the two other groups. Also, children in English-only classrooms had lower Spanish vocabulary scores. The study also revealed that when the number of dual language learners in a classroom goes up, the English scores drop, but it's not the same in Spanish vocabulary scores. These findings showed that using a mix of English and Spanish language instructions in English-dominant classrooms could improve English vocabulary development “without a cost to Spanish vocabulary development.” Moreover, using the same data, [Garcia \(2021\)](#) examined peer effects on dual language learners. Her study showed that preschooler dual language learners can benefit from classmates who have relatively strong English vocabulary skills. In fact, DLLs showed better English receptive vocabulary growth (the ability to comprehend words) but weaker Spanish vocabulary receptive growth when they had peers with higher English proficiency. The findings suggested that creating “mixed-language-ability classrooms” and opportunities for students to interact with each other could support and promote children's vocabulary development.

Socio-emotional development

Early childhood is an important period for the development of social-emotional skills. While most research and policies in early childhood had focused on English-only classrooms, the growing population of English language learners and their diverse needs led to studies that included bilingual and multilingual children, too. For example, [Han \(2010\)](#) used data from the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten \(ECLS-K\) 1998-1999](#) to study Latino children's socio-emotional development from

kindergarten to fifth grade with a focus on children's language proficiency. The study found that most of the Latino children who did not speak English began by faring similarly to their White monolingual classmates in terms of socio-emotional well-being. According to Han's analysis, by the fifth grade, fluent bilingual and non-English dominant bilingual children gained the highest levels of "approaches-to-learning, self-control, and interpersonal skills" as well as lowest levels of "internalizing and externalizing behavior problems."

[Gottfried \(2014\)](#) used data from the first wave of ECLS-K 1998-1999 to study the social effects of English language learners on their classmates. The study was one of the first empirical investigations to evaluate the effects of ELL students on the outcomes of their peers in the same classroom. Gottfried demonstrated that having English language learner classmates has effects on non-English language learners. The author's analysis showed that in classes with more ELLs, behavior problems were fewer and social skills increased. Gottfried's research indicated that self-control and self-regulation also increased while non ELLs are exposed to ELL peers. He referenced the earlier study by Cho (2012) and argued that since ELL students are often coming from different cultural backgrounds, there might be classroom opportunities for other students to improve learning by exposing them to new ideas and different cultures.

A few recent articles found opposing results. Utilizing FACES 2009, [Limlingan et al. \(2020\)](#) found a positive correlation between higher concentrations of DLL (Spanish speaking) in a classroom and lower average classroom cooperative behavior. The authors noted that more research needs to be done to find explanations for it. However, a probable reason could be that children in classrooms with a higher concentration of DLLs have fewer opportunities to learn and practice "normative American behavior" compared to mainstream classrooms where teachers may view American culture and behavior as normal and more acceptable.

Also, [Meng \(2020\)](#) found a decline in the social skills of non-ELL children in classrooms with high language diversity. Using FACES 2009, Meng examined the social skills, approaches to learning, and behavior problems of ELL and non-ELL students. Her findings were contrary to scholars such as Cho (2012), who argued that language diversity would help non-ELLs to gain an understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds and improve interpersonal skills. Meng speculates that her findings

indicate that non-ELL students are not “well-equipped” to socially interact with their ELL peers, and she suggests that early childhood education programs need to pay more attention in terms of teaching children how to interact and communicate with children of diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

This Research Spotlight does not reflect all the existing research in the field of early language learning or of early childhood education. To see how each of the ICPSR studies mentioned in this Spotlight has been examined in other scholarly literature, to gain ideas for extending prior research, or to conduct a larger literature review, you can search the [ICPSR Bibliography of Data-related Literature](#). Using search terms like [“English language learners”](#) or [“dual language learners”](#) will lead you to search results containing publications linked to the study data analyzed in them. Discovering data via the literature in this way can begin your investigation of the existing and potential uses of the data distributed by ICPSR.

When authoring publications that include your secondary analysis of study data downloaded from ICPSR, be sure to cite the study in the publication's references section, using the provided data citation and unique identifier (in the form of a URL containing a DOI). Once your paper is published, submit its citation to the ICPSR Bibliography [via this form](#), so it can be added to ICPSR's collection of linked data-related literature, enabling others to find, learn from, and cite your work.

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