

Does it Matter? Effects of Language Programs on Hispanic Academic Achievement

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Abstract

Hispanic student underachievement is a topic being closely monitored by education officials and advocates. Interested stakeholders seek research for best practices and appropriate interventions. Longitudinal studies have provided information about the benefits of participating in a language support program such as Bilingual or ESL. This investigation sought to explore if participating in a language support program predicted Hispanic student achievement on standardized tests.

Educators more than ever face challenges in educating children. One of the important issues that stand out is the need to provide proper language support to the population of English language learners (ELL). Many factors might be affecting student achievement, but does participating or not participating in a language support program really matter? Texas is among the few states that still requires bilingual education and English as a second language (ESL) programs in preparing students speakers of other languages. One of the most important topics is underachievement of the Hispanic student population. Minority underachievement is not a novel idea; however it is an area being strictly monitored by local and state officials (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006; Bracey, 2008). Teachers of today serve students who are considered at risk by many factors; language support programs that include the use of native language are called into doubt

when Hispanic students are still not performing at the same level as their White or Asian counterparts. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the literature about the factors affecting Hispanic ELL academic achievement.

Review of Literature

According to the Census of 2010, Hispanics presently account as the major minority in Hawaii, California, New Mexico and Texas. With this demographic information, educators and interested stakeholders continue to look at the best ways to meet students' needs (Caprano, Caprano, Yetkiner, Rangel-Chavez, & Lewis, 2009). For Hispanics, programs which employ the use of Spanish language not only facilitate the acquisition of the English language, it also "predicts positive academic and postsecondary outcomes in this language minority group" (De Jong, 2004; Guglielmi, 2008, p. 338; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Barr, 2010; Ray, 2009; Rinaldi & Paez, 2008).

In the other hand, most state policies do not support the additive notions of linguistic diversity (Strikus, 2010). Many states seek the early transitions of students from the bilingual programs, some as early as second grade (Proctor et al., 2010). Other state policies like Arizona and California have completely eliminated the possibility to be taught in two languages (Dicerbo, 2000; Escobedo 1999; Proctor et al., 2010). Similarly, many states dictate the amount of time a limited English proficient (LEP) student is served with language support and in most occasions opt to test pupils in English (Dicerbo).

The Hispanic English learner population now comprises 80% of the total U.S. English language learner population including those born inside the country and those that did not (Caprano et al., 2009). Hispanics are making some progress in achievement tests in comparison to Blacks; however, the gap between Hispanics and White and Asians still persists. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the gap in Hispanic performance has narrowed but still continues to stay at a 20-25 points difference from 2005 to 2009 (Brown, 2011). In addition, despite the high concentration of Hispanics, graduation rates are not increasing according to the population enrollment (Caprano et al., 2009; Marwick, 2004).

The implications of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and "High Stakes" tests on minority students are being examined more often by interested education stakeholders (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). Each state has the responsibility of providing with appropriate provisions under NCLB to adequately measure the performance of subgroups such as ELL (Simon, 2010). Ray (2009) suggested that one way to increase scores on standardized tests is to foster the implementation of dual language programs. Because learning two languages requires rigorous and abstract levels of thinking, increased level of skills could be attained (Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2010). Major discrepancies on performance exist between regular education students and those categorized as ELLs (as cited in Horn, 2003).

Bracey (2008) blames the underperformance of minorities to the lack of meaningful learning experiences due to the emphasis states such as Texas have given to ratings and accountability from their Education Agency. McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and

Vasquez-Heilig (2008) argued that “triaging of minority youth out of schools becomes not a side effect of standardized accountability, but an avoidable loss to make the system look successful” (as cited in Bracey, 2008, p. 700). Bracey cautions that true learning is suffering and students are not being prepared for college or for life outside of school. Simon (2010) also expressed this notion; schools are spending too much time preparing students for the state assessment, thus reducing the amount of time students should be learning. Gay (2007), states the same subgroups that are targeted under NCLB are the ones suffering as the curriculum is narrowed even more when ELL are pulled out of the classroom for testing purposes (as cited in Simon, 2010).

Language assimilation and adaptations to dominant behaviors and norms contrary to Hispanic culture has yielded increases in skills and test scores (Akresh & Redstone Akresh, 2010; Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). The older the student is when arriving to the U.S, the more likely he will struggle in acquiring the language (Akresh & Redstone Akresh, 2010). Along this topic, investigators have researched the effect of language acquisition on first, second and third generation children. They speculate that first generation students are more attached to their roots and language and therefore need more help in the education setting. By the third generation of immigrants, the Spanish language in students is nonexistent (Akresh, Redstone Akresh, 2010).

This factor brings about the conclusions of other authors who argue that current standardized or “High Stakes” testing is bias toward minorities. On their report to the President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, Figueroa and Hernandez (2000) noted that exposure to the Spanish language yield a psychometric bias affecting the scores of Hispanic students. They note that in order to alleviate the negative effects of standardized testing, such tests need to be linguistically and culturally appropriate. They further caution that “[t]ranslating a test does not guarantee that test items will have the same degree of difficulty in the other language” (p. 9). Garcia’s study (1991) revealed that vocabulary and lack of cultural cues are seen as contributors for negative implications.

Another negative contribution to the disservice to bilingual students is the lack of knowledge of the language acquisition process. English fluency does not translate to English proficiency (Al Qadi, 2008; Garcia, 1991; Jepson-Green, 1997). Likewise placing a student in a low group due to his pronunciation will greatly hinder the potential of academic success (Garcia). According to Altshuler and Schmautz (2006) trying to fix the culture and ethnicity effects is not easy. Even when implementing intelligence scales such as Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, modifications do not mitigate the effects as other biases are exposed. The current economic market has a need for bilingual, biliterate individuals capable of responding to the population trends and societal needs. Education in the United States still has low percentages of Hispanic students graduating from a four year institutions and from attending graduate school or serving in leadership positions (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compare achievement scores among LEP students participating in a language support programs and students who are considered LEP, but are instructed in an all English setting. Other studies have compared student achievement of ELLs based on ethnicity or to establish student success after they have transitioned to an all English classroom. This investigation explored only Hispanic students who are limited English proficient. Test scores were correlated to achievement for students participating in bilingual or ESL programs versus LEP participants of English-only programs. Participants of this study attended public school districts in Texas. Information was obtained from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), a public information disseminating agency to conduct this correlation study. This investigation sought to reveal if participating in a bilingual or ESL program impacts the performance of Hispanic LEP students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How does participating in bilingual or ESL program relate to Hispanic student academic achievement?
2. What language program is most effective in providing the support Hispanic students need?
3. What performance patterns can be described about LEP students with language support in comparison to LEP students with no language support?

Significance of the Study

This study added to the literature of research on Hispanic student achievement and underachievement. It gives important information regarding the performance of LEP Hispanic students enrolled in the different language programs: bilingual, English as a second language and English-only. School districts can use the information to make better decisions about student program placement and about the improvement of the language support currently provided to Hispanic students.

Method of Procedure

This quantitative research utilized a public information database to obtain information about the performance of Hispanic bilingual and ESL students who participate in a language support program versus those who do not. A correlational research design was conducted because it provides with relationship effects adequate for the formulated research questions and the type of data being extracted. Correlational

research design was also chosen because it can establish the degree of relationship among variables.

Selection of instrumentation

The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), a public database created by the Texas Education Agency was chosen as the instrumentation due to the time constraints to complete this study. This database contains post facto information readily available to the public and suitable for the purposes of this investigation. Reports can be created specifying desired performance indicators and desegregated factors such as ethnicity, sex, special education, low income status, limited English proficient status, at risk status and bilingual/ESL. This database provided the quantitative data needed about LEP students to analyze the relationship among language support program or lack of language support and academic achievement.

Selection of Participants

This investigation conducted random purposeful sampling to obtain participants. This type of sampling was chosen to avoid bias. All districts in the state of Texas were initially selected for examination. Within the selected database, participants were chosen according to ethnicity as Hispanics was the desired population for the purpose of this research. The other required variables were bilingual and ESL participant counts, test performance and finally LEP students who did not receive language services. Permission to access participants was not necessary due to the nature of the information source. Identity of the individual districts was kept confidential to protect privacy of participants. Names and rating were not reported in the findings because those variables were only utilized to ease the process of data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Correlational statistics were used to analyze the 2010 AEIS data report. Correlation coefficient (r) was calculated using Microsoft Excel software. During the data collection stage, districts with invalid information were discarded. Districts without a rating were disqualified as well. To make this investigation more reliable, only districts with more than 20% Hispanic population were included. Only 381 districts out of 1,237 were selected as adequate participants of this investigation. To analyze the data alpha was set at 0.5 leading to the relationships in the variables. Pearson R was also performed to confirm coefficient correlations.

Findings

Program Participation Relationship to Achievement

A positive correlation of 0.6 was found for bilingual participant achievement scores and total district scores. A positive correlation of 0.96 was found for ESL Hispanic participants and district performance scores. These results indicate that as participation of bilingual students in the program increases, their achievement also increases. As ESL performance increases, district performance also increase.

What Program is Better for Hispanic Students?

According to the data analysis, when the correlation coefficient was calculated a 0.6 correlation was established for bilingual participants. The correlation to ESL of 0.96 established a very strong correlation among ESL scores and district total scores. The more ESL students participate in this program the greater chance they have of not receiving services. This relationship was established at 0.89. Both programs show positive relationships about participating on these language programs. These results are limited and further investigation of the specific services provided to ESL will yield a better result.

Language Support versus No Language Support

The relationship of students who did not receive language services was calculated at -0.18, which is not significant enough to establish a relationship between achievement and this variable. Bilingual students not participating of any program showed a coefficient r of -0.12. Though this could mean that less bilingual students are without language services, this quantity is not significant enough to establish a true relationship. ESL students with no language support yielded a strong relationship to achievement of 0.89.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research sought to provide information regarding language support programs and the connection that they have to Hispanic student achievement. Limitations of this study should be noted as due to data restrictions generalization cannot be made. Further investigation is needed to conclude which language program is better for Hispanic students. One of the important factors that need to be investigated is the language of the assessment. This investigation did not distinguished between Spanish and English administrations of the TAKS 2010 test. This factor has implications that can only be answered through a mixed methods research design. Another area of important consideration is the level of English proficiency of the students not receiving services and those in the ESL program. Further investigations need to look at effect of bilingual programs in second, third and even fourth generations of Hispanics. Attention should be

given to the socioeconomic factors that affect Hispanic achievement regardless of what language support program they participate.

Despite all the questions left unanswered by this study, information obtained corroborated previous research that supports bilingual and ESL programs. Ray (2009) found the late exit programs are better for learning. Rinaldi and Paez (2008) suggested that bilingual programs that implement native language instruction are better for students. An investigation that takes in consideration the language model will yield more concrete findings. This study clearly reiterated that bilingual and ESL programs are beneficial for Hispanic children. Longitudinal studies are needed to better answer the research questions. Bilingual programs across the state vary to such degree that generalizations about the benefits cannot be established with this or similar studies. This investigation did not distinguish between grade levels. This is important because bilingual education is only provided in grades k-5. This factor might have skewed the results. Further research that compares performance of K-5 performance of ESL and bilingual children will yield a more significant result.

Information obtained in this research can lead to interesting investigations that will answer the question of which language support program is best and how being limited English proficient in a program that does not offer linguistic assistance affect student performance. For now, participating in a language support program does matter.

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