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**Placement of Former English Language Learners in Middle Schools:
General Education or Dual Language?**

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Abstract

Historically, many educators have attempted to help English Language Learners (ELLs) develop sufficient English skills to be reclassified so that they can be placed in general-education classrooms. At present, educators increasingly favor a policy of placing former ELLs in dual-language settings. But it remains unclear whether former ELLs in middle schools perform better academically in general-education (GE) or dual-language (DL) classrooms. Research was conducted to compare former ELLs placed in GE settings and those who remained in DL classrooms on state tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and math ($n=99$) at the middle-school level. In both subjects, DL students outperformed GE students on two of four yearly test administrations following reclassification, and for ELA averaged across the four, with single-test effects stronger in math than ELA. GE students did not outperform DL students on any of eight tests. Calling into question policies favoring placement of former ELLs in GE classes, the results underscore the efficacy of continuing to use students' home language in instruction following reclassification.

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Every year a great many students who had been classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) pass an examination in English proficiency and are thus “reclassified” – that is, no longer regarded as ELLs pedagogically or legally. Reclassified students as such are typically given one of two placements: a *general education* (GE) class with English as the instructional language; or a *dual language* (DL) class wherein instruction is conducted in English and another language (often Spanish) on an alternating basis. Which placement best allows reclassified students to thrive academically? We present below the results of a research project comparing the test scores of former ELLs placed in GE and DL classrooms at the middle-school level. In what follows we review the relevant literature, describe the research methods used, present findings, and offer a discussion of the educational implications of the findings. At issue is the need to provide students with the optimal learning environment to succeed academically following reclassification.

In the past, an explicit goal for many educators has been to help ELLs become proficient in English so that these students can be placed in a GE classroom where only English is spoken. According to Ovando, Combs, and Collier (2006, p. 48-49):

U.S. school policies for serving culturally and linguistically diverse students that developed during the 1970s and 1980s focused on separate school programs to “fix” what was viewed as a “problem,” [and] students with little proficiency in English were sent for extra help and special services. After receiving such assistance for some limited period of time, students were “exited” from those support services or “mainstreamed,” similar to the approach taken in special education in the past.

From this viewpoint, this “mainstreaming” is best for helping ELLs improve their academic skills and English proficiency (Crawford, 1992, 2000; Villegas, Saiz de la Mora, Martin, & Mills, 2018; Varela, 2010).

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In contrast, more recent studies have suggested that continued use of students' home language in school enhances achievement in both language skills and academic content (DeJong, 2002; Lauchlan, Parisi, & Fadda, 2013; Laurent & Martinot, 2010; Leiken, 2013; Veliyeva, 2015; Wakabayash, 2002). From this viewpoint, student understanding of academic language used within the school community is important to the comprehension of academic content.

Academic language proficiency includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce grades. [Students] encounter far more low frequency words...complex syntax...and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Students are required to understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (e.g. literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language in an accurate and coherent way in their writing (Cummins, 2001, pp. 65-66).

Accordingly, research has consistently shown a relationship between proficiency in the home language and gains in literacy in the new language (August & Shanahan, 2006; Cummins, 1978, 1984; Dixon & Wu, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1995; Gottardo, 2002; Koda, 1994; Sparks, Patton, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Yamashita, 2002). As Gibbons summarizes, "... high levels of skill in the mother tongue, particularly when these include literacy, greatly facilitate the learning of English" (Gibbons, 1991, p. 6). Literacy and content instruction in programs using the home language have been based on the theory of interdependency across languages, such that proficiency in one language facilitates learning in the second language (Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Schecter, 2003; Djigunovic; 2010; Huang, 2016; Mgijsma & Makalena, 2016; Zhang, et al., 2010). Consistent with this theory is the practice of continued use of home-language skills in classroom instruction, even after reclassification.

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Most research in this area has focused on students who remain classified (e.g., Collier, 1992; Hall & Cook, 2012; Kibler & Roman, 2013; Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2012), whereas few studies have investigated the academic outcomes of former ELLs. But there may be risks associated with mainstreaming former ELLs into GE classrooms. At the time of exit from an instructional program for ELLs, all English language support is abruptly withdrawn. Termination of this support leaves responsibility for students' academic success in the hands of general-education teachers, who may not be equipped to offer follow-up instruction (DeJong, 2004, 2012; Flohm, 2013; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). Moreover, many former ELLs are still adjusting to the norms and attitudes of the dominant culture – in this case, that of the United States, which may be quite different from the cultural aspects of their country of origin (Cuero et al., 2007; Hoover, 2012; Jao, 2012). Students may not completely understand the nuances of the academic content classes and may experience frustration (Gerstein, 1996; Gu, 2015; Heng, 2011; Kim, Park, Jang, & Ham, 2017; Younquist, Martinez-Griego, & Guillen, 2009). Accordingly, research indicates sharp declines in test scores as ELLs make the changeover from a bilingual/ESL setting to a general-education one (De la Rosa & Maw, 1990; Gerstein & Woodward, 1995; McEneaney, Lopez, & Nieswandt, 2014; Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001; Ramirez, 1992).

These difficulties are evident in a study conducted by DeJong (2004), who compared former ELLs to never-classified students on test scores in math, science, and English language arts (ELA) in 4th and 8th grade. Results revealed that former ELLs and GE students produced similar scores in 4th grade. But in 8th grade, GE

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students outperformed former ELLs in math and science, with more former ELLs falling into the category designated as failing. Despite well-intentioned attempts at support by educators, it appears that ELLs transitioned into general-education classrooms found it challenging to keep up with their never-classified peers.

“English..speakers are not standing still waiting for English language learners to catch up... thus, English language learners must catch up with a moving target” (Cummins, 2001, p. 75). According to an estimate by Collier and Thomas (1999), ELL students must achieve 1.5 years in scholastic gains during every school year in order to catch up with native English speakers within a six-year time frame (see also Lesaux, Rupp, & Siegel, 2007; Kieffer, 2008).

Research as such raises the question of the effectiveness of mainstreaming former ELLs into GE classrooms, where instruction in the home language is terminated. Such a situation calls for research that compares the academic outcomes of former ELLs who have been placed in GE classrooms (in which only English is spoken) with former ELLs placed in DL settings (wherein the home language is used for instructional purposes). This research is lacking, and it remains unclear the extent to which the academic outcomes of reclassified students vary across GE and DL placements. Moving into the breach, the study reported below investigates possible differences between students in GE and DL placements on state tests in English Language Arts and math. The study addresses the need to provide former ELLs with the optimal learning environment to succeed academically.

Methods

Research design and participants. The basic strategy of this research was to collect test-score data in ELA and math from former ELLs, with the goal of comparing students placed in GE with their peers who remained in DL classrooms, controlling for gender. Participants included 99 students, with 50 boys and 49 girls. These students were enrolled in a middle school in a large city in the northeastern United States. The school is located in a high-poverty neighborhood and is designated by the state as “high-needs,” which means the school has comparatively few educational resources to meet students’ academic needs. All students in the sample qualified for the federal free-lunch program, an indication of the poverty faced by this school and its students. This middle-school site was selected because both the feeder elementary schools and the middle school at which the research was conducted had well-developed dual-language programs, allowing students sufficient time to reap the benefits of dual-language instruction.

Participating students were initially classified as ELLs by the state, a designation made on the basis of a state-administered standardized test of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the English language. But the study included only students reclassified as former ELLs based on satisfactory performance on the state English-proficiency test. All participants spoke Spanish as their first language; while the school enrolled a very small (less than 2%) population with first languages other than Spanish, these students were not included in the study because none had been reclassified.

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Procedure. School administrators placed 47 former ELLs in two GE classes, with 52 remaining in two dual-language classes, continuing the placements students had been given in elementary school. In the GE classes, instruction was presented in English only. In the DL setting, instruction was conducted in both English and Spanish on an alternating basis; in general, these classes were conducted in English on one day and in Spanish the next. It was not the case that particular academic subjects (e.g., math) were consistently taught in one language and not the other.

In each classroom setting, students completed a total of eight tests over four years (2012-2015), with each test administered following ELL reclassification. Students were assessed annually in ELA and math in grades 6-9. These assessments were designed by the state and administered by school personnel. Assessments as such are often described as “high stakes” because they are used in accountability evaluation of schools, programs, educators, and students. Student responses to the test questions were converted to four-point scales, with “4” indicating the highest level of performance and a “1” indicating the lowest level.

Results

Analysis of the data initially included 10 variables: group (GE vs. DL), gender, and eight test scores (annual ELA and math assessments over four years). Responses for these ten variables were collected from 99 participants. Of the 999 possible responses, 981 were available and 18 were missing; all missing values were test scores, and all were replaced with the mean for the test within the group. No outliers were found ($p < .001$). Two additional variables were computed: the

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mean of the four ELA scores (ELA overall), and the mean of the four math scores (math overall). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

MANCOVA and MANOVA procedures were conducted to examine the effects of group and gender on the dependent variables. For all MANCOVA and MANOVA models presented below, assumptions tests were satisfactory including multivariate normality, absence of multicollinearity ($r < .90$), and homogeneity of variance ($p > .05$).

In the first model, a MANCOVA, the dependent variables were the eight test scores and independent variables were group and gender. The model showed a significant contribution of the independent variables on the dependent ones. Gender had no effect on any of the dependent variables (p -values ranged from .18 to .90), and there were no significant interactions between group and gender (p -values ranged from .28 to .99), so a second model was performed excluding gender.

In the second model, a MANOVA, a significant contribution of the independent variable on the dependent ones was obtained. Significant between-subjects effects were found for four of the eight dependent variables, in each case showing that the DL group outperformed the GE group:

- 1) ELA in 2102: $f(1, 97) = 4.15, p < .05$, partial eta-squared = .04
- 2) ELA in 2103: $f(1, 97) = 3.83, p < .05$, partial eta-squared = .04
- 3) Math in 2013: $f(1, 97) = 12.96, p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .18
- 4) Math in 2014: $f(1, 97) = 8.64, p < .01$, partial eta-squared = .08

This second model excluded the overall means (averaging the four years of tests) in both ELA and math, because including these variables could engender

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problems of multicollinearity. (This is unsurprising, considering that an average is often highly correlated with at least some of the values being averaged.) Hence, a third model was fit: a MANCOVA with ELA overall and math overall as dependent variables with group and gender as independent variables.

The model showed that the independent variables contributed significantly to the variance in the dependent variables. Gender had no effect on either of the dependent variables (p-values of .45 and .82), and there were no significant interactions between group and gender (p-values of .73 and .80), so a fourth and final model (a MANOVA) was run excluding gender.

The MANOVA revealed that the grouping variable made no significant contribution to the variance in math overall (although it was close, $p = .07$, and a larger sample might have reached statistical significance in this instance). For ELA overall, however, a significant difference was found attributable to group, such that the DL group showed the stronger performance: $f(1, 97) = 3.84, p < .05$, partial eta-squared = .04.

In summary, there were no dependent variables for which the GE group was significantly higher than the DL group. But the DL group outperformed the GE one in five of the 10 dependent variables, including two years of ELA tests, ELA overall, and two years of math tests. Moreover, the effect sizes were larger in math (partial eta-squared values of .08 and .19) than in ELA (three partial eta-squared values of .04).

Discussion

A research project conducted to compare the academic outcomes associated with DL and GE placements among former ELLs revealed advantages for the DL

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approach. This pattern was obtained on tests of both ELA and math, but it is less clear in which subject the effects were most meaningful. The effects were more consistent in ELA, evident in two of the four testing years and for the four years on average. But the obtained effects were stronger in math, as indicated by partial eta-squared statistics – one of which was twice as large as the ELA effect sizes, and one of which was four times larger. In light of these effect sizes, it appears that math is the subject in which the advantages of DL are most pronounced.

This seems an important observation given the emphasis in the United States at present on improving math performance, especially among populations such as the “high needs” one served by the participating school. A great deal of evidence shows that these populations lag substantially behind more affluent students in math (Berger & Archer, 2016; Berkowitz, Moore, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2012; Eamon, 2002; Hoff, 2013; Hoy, 2012; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; McKinney, Chappell, Berry, & Hickman, 2009; Myers, Kim, & Mandala, 2004). Keeping former ELLs in DL classrooms may be part of a larger strategy to improve math outcomes in high-needs schools.

In both math and ELA, the results underscore the effectiveness of continuing to use the first language as an instructional vehicle following reclassification. Former ELLs are deemed proficient in English as defined by a state test, but that does not mean the first language is not a great deal stronger, and it often is. Taking advantage of that linguistic skill may pay off in challenging and technical subjects such as math.

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Results of this study call into question policies favored by some educators to place former ELLs in GE classrooms as quickly as possible – perhaps immediately following reclassification. Policies as such may be working to hinder the academic growth of reclassified ELLs.

It should be noted that educators consider factors other than academic ones when making placement decisions. Some may believe, as many educators have in the past, that mainstreaming students into the English-only world best positions them for a successful future in a society that prioritizes one language above all others (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006). Such a viewpoint may come, the research presented here suggests, at the expense of academic progress. This may prove to be a significant hindrance, especially as the educational system in the United States becomes increasingly oriented toward accountability evaluations made using academic measures such as test scores. From a strictly academic perspective, DL seems to be more beneficial than GE for reclassified ELLs, perhaps to the greatest extent in math.

As for limitations and directions for future research, the current study is limited in that the dataset provided no insight as to the academic, English, or Spanish skills of students prior to reclassification, or the instructional models students previously received; at the same time, the study's four years of post-reclassification data allowed a sufficient period for the effects of GE or DL instruction to accrue. The study's results ought to be replicated with a larger sample, and also with a sample that is more broadly based; although this research was conducted in a typical school in a high-poverty area of a major city (similar to

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many other schools that meet this description), the research should be replicated in numerous schools, with efforts made to control for school effects. Similarly, the need exists for this research to be replicated in geographical areas other than the northeastern United States, as it cannot be assumed that students in all geographical areas perform similarly. This study was conducted with middle-school students, so it remains unclear if the results would be similar at the elementary or high-school levels. Finally, these data do not explore the extent to which special-education students and students not so classified show similar results; future research might well be conducted to compare the results of these populations.

This study's results suggest that although reclassified ELLs are often placed in general-education settings, they may be better served in dual-language classrooms. In classrooms as such, fluency in the home language continues to facilitate academic growth.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables, by Group

Variable	<u>General Education</u>			<u>Dual Language</u>		
	Mean	SD	SE	Mean	SD	SE
ELA 2012	3.06	.42	.06	3.21*	.32	.06
ELA 2013	2.49	.62	.09	2.73*	.60	.08
ELA 2014	2.52	.57	.08	2.72	.53	.74
ELA 2015	2.74	.57	.09	2.89	.62	.87
ELA Overall	2.70	.48	.07	2.88*	.45	.49
Math 2012	3.71	.50	.07	3.64	.46	.06
Math 2013	2.59	.51	.08	2.99*	.58	.08
Math 2014	2.55	.55	.08	2.93*	.70	.09
Math 2015	3.08	.68	.09	3.13	.63	.09
Math Overall	3.00	.49	.07	3.17	.49	.07

Notes. ELA = English Language Arts exam; Math = mathematics exam; ELA Overall = average of four years of ELA exams, 2012-2015; Math Overall = average of four years of math exams, 2012-2015.

* Means for dual-language classes that were significantly higher than means for general-education classes ($p < .05$).