



# Research Brief

## Instruction in Spanish and Outcomes for Pre-Kindergarten English Language Learners<sup>1</sup>

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This study examined associations between classroom quality, amount of instruction in Spanish, and academic learning of Spanish-speaking 4 years-olds. Findings suggest that gains in reading and math were larger when children received more instruction in Spanish in classrooms with more responsive and sensitive teachers. It is possible that instruction in Spanish in high-quality classrooms may enhance the academic skills for children with limited English.

Over the last decades, there has been a heavy investment in providing publicly-funded child care and early education opportunities for children from low-income families as a way to reduce the achievement gap between children of different race and ethnicities. Many of these child care programs serve English Language Learners (ELL), and a debate has emerged on language use in instruction in the classroom.

There is considerable evidence that all children benefit from high quality preschool experiences, but that Spanish-speaking children show even larger gains. There is some mixed evidence suggesting that instruction in their home language, in addition to instruction in English, leads to larger gains. This study combined these two findings to ask whether gains in academic skills were associated with experiencing high quality child care, and if those are larger when Spanish-speaking children receive more instruction in Spanish.

### The Study

Researchers used data from two studies conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) entitled the Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten (Multi-State) and the State-Wide Early Education Programs Study (SWEEP). The Multi-State Study involved 6 states of 40 Pre-Kindergarten sites in 2001-2002, and the SWEEP Study involved an

additional 5 states with 100 sites in 2003-2004. In both studies, one classroom per site participated in the study for a total of 701 classrooms. Four children per classroom were randomly selected to participate. This study included the 357 Spanish-speaking 4-year-old children in these 701 classrooms.

### Child Outcomes

Direct Assessments were used to measure:

- **Language Skills** (Test de Vocabulario en Imágenes Peabody [TVIP] and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test [PPVT])
- **Reading and Math Skills** (Woodcock Munoz and Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery)

These were administered in Spanish in the fall, and either in Spanish or English in the spring depending on the child's competence in English.

<sup>1</sup>This research brief is based on the following published study: Burchinal, M., Field, S., Lopez, M. L., Howes, C. & Pianta, R. (2012). Instruction in Spanish in pre-kindergarten classrooms and child outcomes for English language learners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27, 188-197. doi: 10.1016/j.jecresq.2011.11.003

This published study can be purchased at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885200611000895>

## Observations

**Spanish Instruction.** Each child was observed for 40 minutes across 2-3 mornings, and the proportion of instruction that was provided in Spanish was computed from ratings collected with the Emerging Academics Snapshot.

**Classroom Quality.** The version of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) used in this study assessed two global domains of the quality of teacher-child interactions within pre-Kindergarten classroom:

- Emotional Support reflects to teacher's sensitivity during interactions with children and the emotional tone of the classroom.
- Instructional Support reflects the extent to which teachers provided a comprehensive development of concepts and detailed feedback during instruction.

## Findings

Findings suggest that even modest levels of instruction in Spanish appears to enhance acquisition of academic skills in high-quality centers for children who enter pre-kindergarten with limited English proficiency levels. This association was observed despite the fact that most children experienced relatively little instruction in Spanish, with about a quarter of the children receiving no instruction in Spanish and 50% of the children received less than 25% of their instruction in Spanish.

Findings also suggested amount of Spanish instruction was a positive predictor of math score when teachers were responsive and supportive in interactions with students, and negative predictor when they were harsh or uninvolved. These Spanish-speaking children showed larger gains in reading and math skills, but not language skills, when they had emotion-

ally supportive teachers and received even some of their instruction in Spanish.

## Conclusion

This study provides further evidence that instruction in Spanish does not appear to harm English Language Learners (ELL) children who become minimally proficient in English during their pre-kindergarten year. Perhaps more importantly, the findings also provide further evidence that the provision of instruction in Spanish can promote reading and math skill development among these very vulnerable children who are struggling to learn English, especially when they attend high-quality programs.

These findings may be especially important due to the fact they were collected from prekindergarten programs across 11 states chosen because the programs had existed for five or more years. Thus, the programs and children were not selected to study this issue specifically, reducing some concerns about that the selection of how to study might bias the findings.

The results suggest that future efforts should not only examine specific instructional practices for distinct subgroups of ELL children, but also need to include an examination of the important role that the quality of classroom experiences plays, both alone and in combination with the types of instructional practices supporting ELL children's learning.

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