

# Tulsa SEED Study

STUDY OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY & UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA-TULSA

## The Role of Bilingual Supports in Dual Language Learners' Language & Literacy Development

### *Findings from the Tulsa SEED Study*

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Dual language learners (DLLs) – young children developing in two or more languages – compose a third of the U.S. preschool and early elementary student population.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, early childhood education policies have only recently begun to focus on supporting DLLs' development as bilinguals.<sup>2</sup> According to both linguistic theories of language development<sup>3</sup> and empirical psychological and neuroscientific studies,<sup>4</sup> bilingual development is *dynamic*, meaning that English and children's home languages develop and build off one another throughout childhood. As such, the provision of *bilingual supports* in both the home language and in English may be an important element of quality early care and education to support DLLs' early learning, including their oral language and English literacy skills needed to thrive in English-dominant education settings.

This brief summarizes recent findings on the role of bilingual support in DLLs' oral language and English literacy development throughout early education using data on Spanish-speaking DLLs from preschool in 2017 through first grade in 2019. Data are drawn from the Tulsa School Experiences & Early Development (SEED) Study, a study of the early educational experiences of children from economically-disadvantaged families who attended public early education settings in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

With these data, the study presented in this brief sought to answer the following questions:

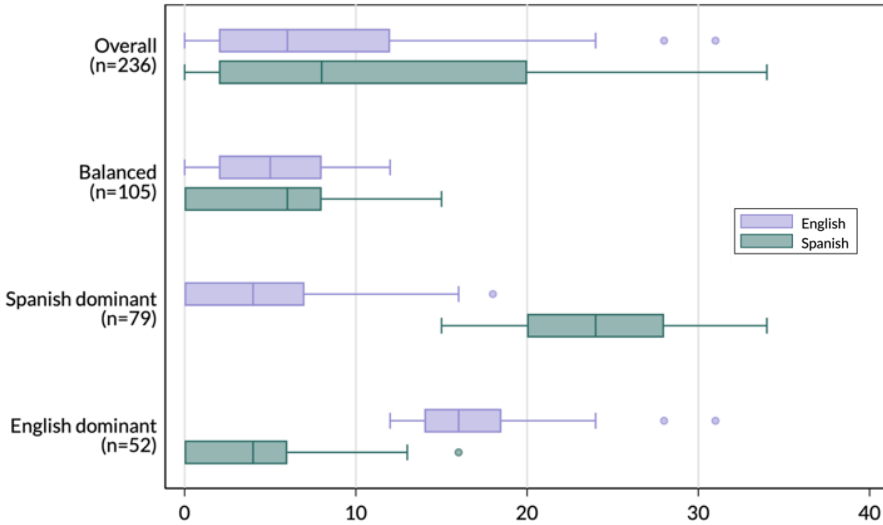
1. What are the English and Spanish skills of DLL students in Tulsa at the start of preschool?
2. What is the effect of bilingual support (teachers' use of Spanish, provision of Spanish materials and resources) on oral language and English literacy outcomes – specifically English oral comprehension, Spanish oral comprehension, English print recognition, and English phonological awareness?<sup>5</sup>
3. What mechanisms explain links between bilingual support and outcomes? Specifically, how does classroom bilingual support affect individual children's educational experiences, such as how often they speak and listen to Spanish in the classroom and closeness with their teachers,<sup>6</sup> which in turn may affect their development?

#### **Summary of key findings:**

1. Spanish-speaking DLLs in Tulsa enter school with diverse profiles of language skills.
2. Teachers' use of Spanish can promote DLLs' English literacy development.
3. Bilingual support benefits DLLs partially through close student-teacher relationships.

## Spanish-speaking DLLs in Tulsa enter school with diverse profiles of language skills.

**Figure 1.** Profiles of DLLs' English and Spanish vocabulary skills



Based on their English and Spanish expressive vocabulary skills,<sup>7</sup> DLLs were grouped into three distinct profiles of bilingual skills at preschool entry.<sup>8</sup> The largest group was the *balanced* group, who entered preschool with similar skills in both English and Spanish (44%). A third (33%) of children were *Spanish dominant*, categorized by high Spanish skills and low English skills at preschool entry. The remaining 22% were *English dominant*, categorized by high English skills and low Spanish skills at the start of preschool.

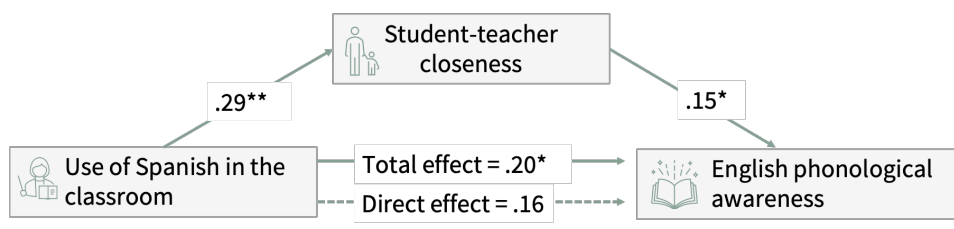
## Teacher's use of Spanish can promote English literacy skills for DLLs.

Within-child analyses controlling for individual characteristics of children and a range of classroom and family characteristics<sup>9</sup> revealed that, on average, DLL children had greater English phonological awareness skills at the start of the school year when they had a teacher who used Spanish the year prior.<sup>10</sup> Children who were English dominant at the start of preschool also scored higher on English print recognition when they had a teacher who used Spanish.<sup>11</sup> Teacher's provision of Spanish materials was not associated with English literacy. Neither teachers' use of Spanish nor provision of Spanish materials were associated with English nor Spanish oral comprehension. Results suggest teachers' use of Spanish can promote DLL students' English literacy development. Additionally, English literacy skills – which are explicitly taught in early education – may be more influenced by teacher practice than oral comprehension skills.

## Bilingual support benefits DLLs partially through close student-teacher relationships.

A fifth (21%) of the effect of teacher's use of Spanish on English phonological awareness was attributable to student-teacher closeness (Figure 2); in other words, teachers who use Spanish formed closer relationships with their DLL students, who in turn improved their phonological awareness skills. There was no evidence that the effects of teachers' use of Spanish on English phonological awareness was mediated by children's own use of Spanish in the classroom.

**Figure 2.** Mediation by student-teacher closeness



## More findings on Spanish-speaking DLLs in Tulsa SEED

- Dual Language Supports for Dual Language Learners? Exploring Preschool Classroom Instructional Supports for DLLs' Early Learning Outcomes: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.03.011>
- Exploring the Predictors of Enrollment and Kindergarten Entry Skills of Spanish-Speaking Dual Language Learners in a Mixed-Delivery System of Public Preschool: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106857>
- The Intersection of Teacher-Child Language & Ethnic Match for Hispanic/Latine Dual Language Learners in Early Elementary School: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.10.001>
- Hispanic English Language Learner Families and Food Insecurity during COVID-19: Risk Factors and Systems of Food Support: <https://doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000644>

## WHAT IS TULSA SEED?

The Tulsa SEED Study is led by Principal Investigators Drs. Anna Johnson and Deborah Phillips at Georgetown University, Dr. Diane Horm at the University of Oklahoma – Tulsa, and Dr. Gigi Luk at McGill University. The full SEED study team includes Dr. Sherri Castle, Dr. Anne Martin, April Dericks, Anne Partika, Anna Wright, Dr. Jane Hutchison, and Dr. Owen Schochet. Tulsa SEED is made possible through funding from the Heising-Simons Foundation, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the University Strategic Organization Initiative at the University of Oklahoma, the Spencer Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The development of this brief was supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award (Grant #: 90YR0135) totaling \$25k with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, visit the ACF website, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements>.

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<sup>1</sup> Migration Policy Institute. (2021). *Young dual language learners in the United States and by state*. Migration Policy Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Castro, D. C. & Meek, S. (2022). Beyond Castañeda and the “language barrier” ideology: Young children and their right to bilingualism. *Language Policy*.

<sup>3</sup> García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>4</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English*.

<sup>5</sup> English print recognition was measured using the Letter-Word Identification subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (Woodcock et al., 2001). English phonological awareness was measured using the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF; Semel et al., 2003; 2006), which measures letter-sound correspondence. English and Spanish oral comprehension were measured using the CELF Sentence Structure subtest, which measures children’s abilities to understand orally presented sentences.

<sup>6</sup> Children’s ratio of time spent speaking and listening to Spanish relative to English in the classroom was measured using the Child Observation in Preschool (COP; Peabody Research Institute, 2017). Children’s closeness with their teachers was assessed using the teacher-reported Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (STRS-SF; Pianta, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> English and Spanish expressive vocabulary were measured using the CELF (Semel et al., 2003; 2006). Expressive vocabulary was chosen to identify profiles of children’s skills a preschool entry because (i) the same measure was available in English and Spanish, and (ii) expressive vocabulary is most aligned with the WIDA screener used to designate English Learner status in TPS preschools.

<sup>8</sup> Profiles were identified using latent profile analysis, a statistical technique that uses observed continuous variables to identify latent (unobserved) groups.

<sup>9</sup> Within-child fixed effect regression analyses were used to predict children’s fall skills from supports the previous year. Child fixed effects control for all individual characteristics of children that do not change over time (e.g., ethnicity). Models also include time fixed effects, which control for all things that change over time that are constant across children (e.g., curriculum changes from preschool to kindergarten). Models also control for teacher gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience, Spanish fluency, and age; classroom quality (emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support) and proportion of children in the classroom who are DLLs; child’s relative use of Spanish and English at home, mother’s marital status, household income, and household size.

<sup>10</sup> Effect size was moderate:  $\theta = .21$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .03$

<sup>11</sup> Effect size was large:  $\theta = .40$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $p = .03$