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**Elementary (Grades 2-6) Long-Term English Language Learners:  
Factors Related to Acquisition of English**

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### Abstract

This study presents findings from one high needs school district of the factors that were predictors of long-term elementary (grades 2-6) English language learners (ELLs) progress in English. Data included 1,031 elementary Spanish-speaking students who were continuously enrolled greater than 2.5 years in the district's language support programs. Regression analysis revealed that Pre-LAS-O English and Spanish total scores contributed significantly (4.2%) to the prediction of current English level. For students taking the LAS-O at entry, variables of entry age of student, English and Spanish total scores were not statistically significant in helping understand current English level. Findings and implications for teachers, district-level data collection, and language policy with respect to NCLB mandates are discussed for those students left behind.

## Introduction

Long-term English language learners are students, either immigrant or native born, who have lived in and attended school in the United States but who have not “developed high levels of literacy in either their first language or English” (Freeman, Freeman, & Mecuri, 2003, x). They present new challenges to teachers and school districts working to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2002). Given the mandates of No Child Left Behind that all students will be proficient in reading, writing, mathematics, and science by 2014, and given the fact that most states now require or intend to make proficiency on high-stakes tests a requirement for high school graduation, the development of appropriate programs for long-term English language learners will be essential if they are to meet this requirement.

Identifying the most effective programs and instructional methods needed for these students to acquire the English language and cognitive skills needed to succeed academically is of critical educational importance. However, no single formula has been found that will adequately predict how long English language learners need to become proficient in English and succeed academically (U.S. General Accounting Agency, 2001). Although researchers have argued that it may take up to eight years (Collier & Thomas, 2004), some policy makers have decided that English language proficiency can be achieved in less than three years (Bergeson & Heuschel, 2002; Bylsma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2003).

School districts need to examine their specific contextual factors that are most applicable to the development of comprehensive programs for long-term English

language learners (Thomas & Collier, 2003). These factors may include language proficiency level, age and time of program entry, academic proficiency in their native language, and the degree of support for achieving proficiency (Cummins, 1981, 1996, 2000; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). But before comprehensive policy and school district program and instructional changes can be made, research and evaluation of current data collection methods needs to be done to determine why long-term English language learners are not learning English (Collier & Thomas, 2004). More specifically, based on current district data, local educational personnel need to identify what factors can be found that will enable them to understand students' current language levels and progress in learning English.

The present study explored one school district's data collection policy that documented the following factors: students' age at entry, Pre-Language Assessment Scale-Oral (Pre-LAS-O) and Language Assessment Scale (LAS-O) English/Spanish total scores, current type of second language support program, and current level of English as measured by the ESL program outcomes measures. These factors were then examined for their usefulness as predictors of current English level for continuously enrolled long-term elementary English language learners (2.5+ years). In essence, this study provides an analysis template that goes beyond descriptive student characteristics to examine current data collection practices regarding the amount of time a student spends in an English language learner program with the results providing beneficial insight into school districts for instructional, data collection, and policy practices (Hamann, Zuliani, & Hudak, 2004; Oretaga & Ibarri-Shea, 2005; NREL, 2004; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001).

### Background

*“Subject to the exceptions provided in section 15-753, all children in Arizona public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English and all children shall be placed in English language classrooms. Children who are English learners shall be educated through sheltered English immersion during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year” (Arizona PL 15-752).*

Policy makers, as evidenced by recent legislation in Arizona and California, have assumed that English language proficiency can be achieved in less than three years. Researchers, however, have challenged this assumption by providing evidence that suggest true language proficiency may take longer to achieve (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta 1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). In fact, it could take as long as seven to ten years, depending on whether oral proficiency or academic language proficiency are being considered (Cummins, 1987; Hakuta, Goto-Butler & Witt, 2000). Research designed to answer the question of how much time it takes to learn and achieve at grade level in English have examined the following issues: a) what kind of program best supports English language acquisition (Collier, 1992; Collier, 1995; Platt, Harper, & Mendoza, 2003; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991); b) what role should students’ first language play in instruction (Crawford, 2004; Wiley & Wright, 2004); and c) how does the initial type of program at entry affect the length of time language minority students need to learn English and achieve academically on a level equal to that of their English-speaking peers (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2003). These questions have been studied extensively in terms of the general secondary English language learner population (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000), but they have not been closely studied with respect to

elementary long-term English language learners in the program greater than 2.5 years (Campbell & Johnson, 2006; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).

School districts have research personnel who routinely gather a vast amount of data, and traditionally gather more data than they can use. For many, they often fail to use all, or the potential, of the data in effective program planning and evaluation (Ligon, 2005; Palaich, Good, & van der Ploeg, 2004). In many cases, current data about educational inputs, such as the qualifications of teachers and the rigor of curricula are lacking, and in most states, data about educational outcomes continues to be vague, confusing, and not clearly linked to student outcomes (DuFour, Eaker, & Eaker, 2005; McLeod, 2005; Palaich, Good, & van der Ploeg, 2004; Schmoker, 1999). A challenge for districts working to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind legislation is to identify factors affecting students' acquisition of English, as well as to plan and implement the most effective programs needed for students to acquire the language proficiency skills they need to succeed academically (Adebi, 2004; Abella, Urrutia, & Shneyderman, 2005; Hofstetter, 2004; Ortega & Iberra-Shea, 2005).

Another challenge is to develop an accountability system, beyond baseline descriptive data, to establish goal-setting data-driven models for programmatic planning, support, and evaluation (DuFour, Eaker, & Eaker, 2005; McLeod, 2005). Conceptually, this means that district officials could benefit from data about the English language learner that can provide a picture for them in understanding the effectiveness of English language teaching and learning. However, "The typical approach [however] to program planning for English second language learners is to relegate the decision making to special programs people" (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997, 69). This lateral shift

of responsibility elicits concern as research has shown that greater academic achievement can be achieved for students in English language learning programs by having district officials attentive to the English language learners program (Dentler & Hafner, 1997). Under the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation, school districts and officials are required to test students, collect performance data, and use that data to identify strengths and weaknesses in their educational system. However, if the data is being shifted from district officials to others, then effectiveness and quality of educational outcomes of these students could be jeopardized. It is therefore essential that data for English language learners be identified that will enable educational officials to make effective policy and programmatic decisions (Palaich, Good, & van der Ploeg, 2004).

Pressures on low achieving, high-needs, ethnically diverse schools to develop programs that raise achievement test scores, meet annual yearly progress goals, and address issues facing traditionally disenfranchised groups continue to increase. Given the ultimate goal for 100% of students to attain proficiency levels in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science by 2114, and given that only 32% of the nation's students are at or above proficiency (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), the task facing many districts appears formidable. Comprehensive national and longitudinal studies have examined the issue of effective programs for the general ESL (English as a second language) student population. These studies, however, did not focus on long-term English language learners and the use of district-level entry data as predictors to their acquisition of English. Given the lack of focus in current research on this new ELL population, data collection and assessment tools based on those studies may be



inadequate or inappropriate to design programs that effectively meet their needs. A major purpose of the present study was to identify how current district-level collected data of age, Pre-Language Assessment Scale-Oral (Pre-LAS-O) and Language Assessment Scale (LAS-O) for English/Spanish total score at program entry were predictive of current level of English for elementary English language learners in the program greater than 2.5 years.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data were obtained from two statistical reports for the 2001-2002 academic years from one high-needs school district in a Northwestern state. The total district student population was approximately 14,000 with 70% of the students being on free and reduced lunch, 24% classified as migrant, 54% were Hispanic (primarily Mexican-American), and 30% or 4,200 being classified as English language learners, of which 98% were Spanish speakers (OSPI, 2003). The present sample included district level elementary student data (N=2,304) of all English language learners in grades 2-6 who were receiving language support services.

Participants in this study included students (n=1031) who had been continuously enrolled in the school district from 2.5 to 7.0 years and were all Spanish speakers. Students were divided into two groups based on whether they took the Pre-Language Assessment Scale-Oral (Pre-LAS-O) or the Language Assessment Scale-Oral (LAS-O). For those taking the Pre-Language Assessment Scale-Oral (Pre-LAS-O) placement test, they included 934 students with 46% being female and 54% being male between the ages of 4 to 7 with an average time in program of 3.98 years. The second group(n=97) took the

Language Assessment Scale-Oral (LAS-O) placement test and included 47% female and 53% male between the ages of 5 and 9 with an average time in program of 3.42 years.

### *Measures*

*Age at entry* was derived from the district data by subtracting date of entry from date of birth. *Time in Program* was derived by subtracting the date of entry from the date of data collection with the result being time in program. For the present study, only those students greater than 2.5 years who were continuously enrolled were part of the sample.

*English Total Score* and *Spanish Total Score* were acquired from students English and Spanish Oral Pre-Language Assessment Scale-Oral (LAS-O) and Language Assessment Scale-Oral (LAS-O) scores as documented in district student data reports. These tests were administered within ten days after a student registered in the district with the purpose of determining a student's language level for the purpose of placement in the district's language support program. The English and Spanish Pre-LAS and LAS-O tests were administered and the scores derived by bilingual evaluators for the school district in accordance to the scoring manual procedures (DeAvila & Duncan, 1994).

*Entry Program* was determined by the overall Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O raw scores being converted to standardized scores which then translated into four English Competency Levels for the entry English language learner (Bylsma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2003). Students at a level 1 (no English to beginner) were placed in a transitional bilingual education and received 1 hour and 30 minutes per day in Spanish-language arts instruction (coded as 1). Students at a level 2 (Intermediate English) received ESL instruction with Spanish-language support (coded as 2), and students with a level 3 (Advanced English) were placed in one hour per day of ESL instruction (coded as 3).

Students at level 4 were mainstreamed and were not part of the data collection. All of the programs were consistent with (Bylsma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2003) classification of program models.

*Current ESL Level* was developed from the students' current level of curriculum which for this sample ranged from 100 to 342 language objectives that were designed to be representative of the state's essential academic learning requirements and grade level equivalents (OSPI, 2005). Students using curriculum representative of levels 100-199 were assigned to the beginner level (coded as 1). Students using curriculum levels ranging from 200-299 were assigned to the intermediate level (coded as 2), and those using curriculum levels 300-399 were assigned to the advanced level (coded as 3).

### Results

District level data were entered into SPSS 14.0 and double checked by researchers for accuracy. Means, standard deviations and frequencies were calculated for each variable in the sample along with statistics for regression analysis. As shown in Table 1, for those students continuously enrolled in the English language program greater than 2.5 years, gender was fairly evenly split between those students taking the Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O upon entry to the school district.

INSERT TABLE 1
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Pre-LAS-O assessed students were mostly 5 years of age (88%) when they took the placement test, with the remainder ranging from 4 to 7 years old. Transitional/Bilingual Education program (82%) was the most common program of entry for these students. Their total time in language support programs from 2.5 to 7.0 years

with an average of 4.43 years (SD =1.07) with more than 62% of the students being in the program for 4 years or more.

Students assessed upon entry to the school district using the LAS-O were mostly between the ages of 5 to 7 years (88%). The majority of these students entered the Transitional/Bilingual Education program (83%). This group averaged 3.87 years (SD = .88) in the program with 48% of them being in the English language learner program for 4 to 6 years.

As shown in Table 2, students taking the Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O placement tests upon entry to the school district were fairly similar regarding their English total scores with only a 2 point variation. A little larger between Spanish total scores was observed with those taking the Pre-LAS-O scoring 4 points higher than those taking the LAS-O. With respect to current English level, which was a measure of current English as a Second Language curriculum, they were also fairly similar in means, standard deviations, and range.

Insert Table 2
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Regression analysis results are summarized in the Table 3 below for those students taking the Pre-LAS-O upon entry. Multiple  $R$  for regression was statistically significant,  $F(3,930) = 14.734, p < .001, R^2 \text{ adj} = .042$ . Pre-LAS-O English and Spanish total scores were significant contributors to the prediction of current English level ( $p < .001$ )

Insert Table 3
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Using regression analysis the results summarized in the Table 4 below are for those students taking the LAS-O upon entry to the school district. Multiple  $R$  for regression were not statistically significant,  $F(3,93) = 1.467$ ,  $p = .229$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = .014$ . None of the predictor variables of entry age of student, English, or Spanish total score contributed significantly to the understanding of current English level.

Insert Table 4
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### Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to identify how district-level collected data of age at entry, English/Spanish total score using the Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O at program entry were predictive of current level of English for elementary English language learners in program greater than 2.5 years. Findings revealed that for Pre-LAS-O variables of English and Spanish total scores did contribute significantly to the understanding of long-term English language learner's current English level. However, only 4.2% of the variance of current English level of long-term English language learners continuously enrolled in the program for more than 2.5 years was explained by these two variables. For students taking the LAS-O at entry, none of the variables of age at entry and English and Spanish total scores provided any significant information regarding current level of English for long-term English language learners.

Findings of the present study highlight three concerns regarding long-term English language learners. With respect to current district-level collected data, a large number of factors and variables are missing from current data sets that need to be considered for inclusion in order to help identify and understand the language support

programs and instruction needed by long-term English language learners. One of the largest critical pieces of data missing was updated student assessment data. District level data acquired for this study only contained the initial entry assessment of English and Spanish levels. The data set did not contain other student level information like that of motivation, learning style, perceived usefulness to learn English, self-regulation, networking, social learning, or other related information to affirm the meeting of students' individualized educational needs found by other researchers to be beneficial (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Baker, 2006). Basically, the assessment data collected for this study provided little information regarding student learning, and if other district's are developing data collection methods from similar national models and state/federal requirements, then they are truly inadequate. This may be especially true for district's serving those students who are entering schools with little or no formal education from their home countries, or for students entering schools with weak development in their first language or for those born in the U.S. but living in isolated, high poverty, language communities (Schulte, 2002).

A second highlighted finding from the present study suggests that while prior research is valuable in guiding the decision-making process, local contexts and factors within those contexts must be considered if effective programs are to be developed. For example, labels used to designate program type vary by district, school, and even teacher. In this district, for example, transitional bilingual education meant that students received language arts instruction in their first language while the rest of the subjects were taught in English. This definition is different from that used in national studies. Students at an intermediate ESL level received native language academic tutoring, but guidelines for

this support were broadly defined in the district's curriculum guidelines. The quality and amount of time such help was provided varied by school and professional preparation of the tutors.

A third finding highlighted the need for more comprehensive diagnostic assessment of English language learners at program entry. Although the Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O are valid measures of language dominance, they do not provide information that will help district personnel to identify students that might be long-term English language learners. Additionally, the reliance on oral language assessments at the elementary level provides limited information for program planning. Districts need to assess student entry-level abilities in both languages with respect to the kinds of skills required to exit English language programs. Given the current national emphasis on high-stakes testing, a greater alignment academically and linguistically of entry and exit assessment measures is needed to develop programs designed to meet the instructional needs of all English language learners.

Implications of these findings indicate that one-size does not fit all. For high needs, high-risk students, building-level administrators and teachers may have a better understanding of the social context and of what their students actually need. The development of district-level policies and assignment of students to programs based on current data collection may lead not to student success, but failure. Based on the research discussed in this paper, additional district level data is needed if truly equitable and appropriate programs for diverse students attending high-needs, poor schools, are going to be developed. Program decisions developed from local data, including information from teachers regarding students' classroom activities, may actually be more beneficial

then centralized mandates from district administrators based on standardized data sets. Such mandates may have no correlation to the needs of the students, but reflect the needs of the social contexts in which the programs are implemented.

Limitations of the present study include the use of only one school district's data and only use of those students who were continuously enrolled. Data analysis for students who exit and then become re-admitted to programs may reveal different findings. Another study that includes those students who had successfully exited the programs could also provide greater insight regarding for further survival and failure analyses. Additionally, many of the variables used and not used in the present study could be mediated by numerous other factors which were not accounted for like that of attendance, motivation, learning styles, teachers experience, lesson plans, teaching style, school staffing, curriculum, goals, district funding, resources, and educational priorities to name a few. Future research would address these latter variables and could yield different results.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, long-term English language learners present new challenges to school districts working to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind. Identifying the most effective data collection systems and programs needed for these students to acquire the English skills that they need to succeed academically is of critical educational importance. It is acknowledged by the present researchers that there are no easy answers, no one formula to predict how long students will need to become proficient in English and succeed academically. Local districts will continue to need to examine factors in their own specific context (Thomas & Collier, 2003), however, the district level variables



collected and used in the present study do provide a foundational model to districts. However, to further understand long-term English language learners in their district, schools will need to look much closer to the classroom to find more answers. While, the comprehensive and national longitudinal studies do continue to provide an opportunity to examine issues beyond effective instruction for ESL students, they may also be leaving students behind.

For school districts, they will need to examine in their specific context the factors (Thomas & Collier, 2003) that are most applicable to the development of comprehensive programs for English language learners. These factors may include language proficiency level, age and time of program entry, academic proficiency in their native language, and the degree of support for achieving proficiency (Cummins, 1981, 1996; Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). However, given the mandates of No Child Left Behind that all students will be proficient in reading, writing, mathematics, and science by 2014, and given the fact that most states now require or intend to make proficiency on high-stakes tests a requirement for high school graduation, the development of appropriate programs for long-term English language learners can no longer be ignored.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Percent By Gender, Age at Entry, and Entry Program by Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O Assessed Students in Program Greater Than 2.5 Years in District Program.

<i>Participants</i>	Pre-LAS-O (n=934)		LAS-O (n =97)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	438	46.90	46	47.42
Male	496	53.10	51	52.58
<b>Age at entry in years</b>				
4	21	2.25	0	0
5	825	88.33	39	40.21
6	84	8.99	14	14.43
7	4	0.43	32	32.99
8	0	0	7	7.22
9	0	0	5	5.15
<b>Entry Program</b>				
Transitional/Bilingual Education (Level1)	760	81.37	80	82.47
ESL + Native Language (Level 2)	107	11.46	16	16.49
ESL (Level 3)	67	7.17	1	1.03



Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, Minimum, and Maximum for Pre-LAS-O and LAS-O Scores and Current English Level for Students Greater Than 2.5 Years in District Program.

<i>Variables</i>	Pre-LAS (n=934)				LAS (n =97)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
English total score	28.96	27.34	0	95	25.85	27.36	0	81
Spanish total Score	67.62	16.36	0	100	63.14	18.52	0	96
Current English level	219.76	82.73	103	342	221.60	83.06	104	342

Table 3

Pre-LAS-O Mean, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, Regression Analysis Summary for Current English Level and Entry Level Predictors (n = 933).

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Current English level	219.76	82.73						
1. Entry age of student	5.08	0.35	-0.043			-13.33	7.55	-0.06
2. English total score	28.96	27.34	0.130**	0.038		0.33	0.10	0.11**
3. Spanish total score	67.62	16.36	0.175**	0.061	0.130**	0.83	0.16	0.16**

\*\* p < 0.01 level;  $R^2 = .045$

Table 4

LAS-O Mean, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, Regression Analysis Summary for Current English Level and Entry Level Predictors (n =97).

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Current English level	221.60	83.06						
1. Entry age of student	6.23	1.20	0.07			5.01	7.12	0.07
2. English total score	25.85	27.36	-0.07	-0.186		-0.12	0.31	-0.04
3. Spanish total score	63.14	18.52	0.19	-0.029	-0.067	0.86	0.46	0.19

$R^2 = .014$