

Language Barrier of Non-English-Speaking K–12 Immigrant Students and the Impact on their Academic Outcomes in the United States

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Abstract: This study examines how English language barriers influence the academic outcomes of non-English-speaking K–12 immigrant students in the United States. Drawing on subgroup analysis and an extensive review of peer-reviewed literature, the research highlights how Limited English Proficiency (LEP) restricts access to grade-level content, shapes instructional experiences, and contributes to long-term academic disparities. The findings reveal that English proficiency is a strong predictor of achievement across core subjects, yet immigrant students' outcomes are also shaped by socioeconomic pressures, school mobility, cultural adjustment, and inconsistent program quality. Effective bilingual education, ESL services, and culturally responsive teaching can mitigate these challenges, but deficit-based framing and inequitable resource distribution often limit their impact. The study underscores the need for asset-based approaches, linguistically responsive assessments, and early, high-quality intervention to support immigrant students' academic and social development.

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELLs); Immigrant Students; Limited English Proficiency (LEP); Academic Achievement; Bilingual Education; ESL Programs; Culturally Responsive Teaching; Socioeconomic Factors; School Mobility; Language Barriers; Educational Equity.

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE GROWING ELL POPULATION

English Language Learners (ELLs) represent the fastest growing demographic in the U.S. K–12 public school system, and their rapid increase has significant implications for educational equity and instructional design. Many ELL students struggle to access grade-level academic content due to Limited English Proficiency (LEP), which restricts their ability to fully engage with instruction delivered exclusively in English (Cawthon, 2010). According to Collins (2025), the 2020 U.S. Census revealed that one in four children lives in a household where a language other than English is spoken, underscoring the linguistic diversity present in American schools. Whether immigrant or U.S. born, students who enter school without English as their primary language are often defined by what they lack—namely, English proficiency—rather than by the linguistic and cultural assets they bring (Gándara, 2015). This deficit-based framing shapes how schools perceive and support ELL students, frequently positioning them as remedial learners rather than capable multilingual individuals.

➤ Deficit Framing and its Consequences

The term *English Language Learner* typically refers to students whose home language is not English and who require

specialized instructional support to develop English proficiency (Cawthon, 2010). However, this label often carries unintended consequences. Gándara (2015) argues that ELL students are routinely viewed through a deficit lens, which frames them as lacking essential skills needed for academic success. This perspective influences program design, instructional expectations, and teacher attitudes. Many educational programs for ELLs are structured around “fixing” perceived deficiencies, and students are deemed ready for mainstream instruction only once they demonstrate adequate English proficiency. Such an approach can delay access to rigorous academic content and reinforce inequities by limiting opportunities for ELL students to participate fully in grade-level learning.

➤ Criteria for Identifying ELL Students

Federal guidelines outline specific criteria for identifying students who qualify for ELL services. These criteria include age, enrollment status, country of origin, home language, migratory background, and demonstrated difficulty in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English (Cawthon, 2010). While these criteria help schools determine eligibility for language support, they also highlight the complexity of linguistic diversity among immigrant students. The identification process itself can shape how

students are placed, assessed, and supported, making it a critical component of their educational experience.

➤ *Socioeconomic Factors and Academic Outcomes*

Immigrant students' academic outcomes are shaped not only by language proficiency but also by socioeconomic factors. Crosnoe and Turley (2011) note that recent waves of immigration have brought students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. While not all immigrant children are economically disadvantaged, many face financial pressures, limited access to resources, and responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom. These socioeconomic challenges can compound the difficulties associated with learning English, making academic success more difficult to achieve. Manspile (2021) further emphasizes that immigrant students often navigate unfamiliar educational systems while balancing family obligations, which can hinder their ability to focus on academic tasks.

➤ *School Mobility and Academic Disruption*

School mobility is another factor that disproportionately affects immigrant students. Crosnoe and Turley (2011) argue that even minor school transitions—such as moving between schools within the same district—can disrupt academic progress. For immigrant students, these transitions are often intensified by the broader experience of migrating from one country to another. The cultural, linguistic, and social adjustments required during migration can create additional stress that affects academic performance. When combined with language barriers, these disruptions can lead to long-term academic challenges, including lower achievement in core subjects and delayed graduation.

➤ *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this article is to examine how English language barriers influence the academic outcomes of immigrant K–12 students classified as ELLs. Mastering English as a second language requires students to develop proficiency in phonological, syntactic, and semantic aspects of the language, which can be particularly challenging for learners who must simultaneously acquire academic content (Shi, 2018). This study explores how language proficiency affects academic achievement, how school systems provide pedagogical support, and how these factors collectively shape students' long-term educational and societal outcomes. By comparing ELL academic performance over time, the study seeks to determine whether ELL students are gaining ground, losing ground, or maintaining parity with their non-ELL peers (Gándara, 2015).

➤ *Research Questions*

This study focuses on three central questions:

- How do varying levels of English proficiency influence academic performance across core subjects such as reading, math, and science?
- What specific challenges do immigrant students face in accessing instruction, assessments, and school resources, and how do these challenges shape both short- and long-term academic outcomes?

- How do school-based supports—such as ESL programs, bilingual education, and culturally responsive teaching—mediate the relationship between language barriers and academic achievement?

➤ *Methodological Approach*

This study employs a subgroup analysis methodology to examine the academic outcomes of immigrant ELL students. Subgroup analysis allows for a detailed investigation of specific population clusters, making it possible to identify patterns and disparities that may be obscured in broader datasets. By reviewing findings from multiple peer-reviewed journals, the study synthesizes existing research to highlight how language barriers intersect with socioeconomic factors, instructional practices, and school structures.

II. EXPANDED LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature consistently demonstrates that language proficiency is one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement for immigrant students in U.S. K–12 schools. Researchers have long noted that ELLs face structural barriers that extend beyond language itself, including inequitable access to rigorous coursework, limited instructional scaffolding, and inconsistent program quality across districts (Hakuta, 2011; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). These barriers often intersect with socioeconomic disadvantage, creating cumulative challenges that shape academic trajectories.

A substantial body of research highlights the relationship between English proficiency and performance in core academic subjects. Kieffer (2008) found that ELL students with lower English proficiency consistently lag behind their peers in reading comprehension, which subsequently affects achievement in subjects that rely heavily on text-based instruction. Similarly, Abedi (2004) demonstrated that mathematics assessments often disadvantage ELL students not because of conceptual difficulty, but because linguistic complexity interferes with problem interpretation.

Another critical theme concerns the role of school-based supports. Effective bilingual education programs, structured English immersion, and culturally responsive teaching have been shown to improve academic outcomes when implemented consistently (Umansky & Reardon, 2014). However, program quality varies widely, and many ELLs receive fragmented or insufficient support due to resource constraints, staffing shortages, or policy limitations (Gándara & Orfield, 2012). Teacher preparation also plays a key role; educators with specialized training in second-language acquisition are more likely to implement strategies that promote both language development and content mastery (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

Finally, the literature underscores the social and emotional dimensions of immigrant student experiences. Immigrant youth often navigate cultural adjustment, trauma, and identity formation while simultaneously learning English

and adapting to new academic expectations (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). These factors can influence motivation, engagement, and persistence, making holistic support essential for long-term success.

III. FINDINGS

Analysis of the reviewed literature reveals several consistent patterns regarding the impact of English language barriers on immigrant K–12 students' academic outcomes.

- English proficiency strongly correlates with academic achievement. Students with limited proficiency experience significant difficulty accessing grade-level content, particularly in reading-intensive subjects (Abedi, 2004; Kieffer, 2008).
- Immigrant ELL students face challenges beyond language acquisition. These include navigating unfamiliar school systems, experiencing frequent school mobility, and managing socioeconomic pressures (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011).
- School-based supports vary widely in effectiveness. Programs such as bilingual education and ESL services can significantly improve outcomes when implemented with fidelity, but inconsistent program quality often reduces their impact (Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).
- Long-term academic outcomes depend heavily on early intervention. Students who develop English proficiency by elementary school tend to close achievement gaps over time, while those who remain in ELL programs for extended periods often fall further behind (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that English language barriers significantly shape immigrant students' academic trajectories, but the relationship is complex and mediated by multiple contextual factors. Language proficiency is intertwined with structural inequities, instructional practices, and socioeconomic conditions.

One key implication is that language barriers should not be viewed in isolation. Immigrant students' academic challenges often stem from systemic issues such as limited access to high-quality instruction, insufficient teacher preparation, and inequitable resource distribution. Addressing language barriers therefore requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving program quality, expanding bilingual education, and investing in teacher training.

Another important insight is that academic assessments frequently disadvantage ELL students. Many standardized tests rely heavily on linguistic complexity, making it difficult to accurately measure content knowledge (Abedi, 2004). This raises questions about the validity of assessment practices and highlights the need for linguistically responsive testing accommodations.

The findings also underscore the importance of culturally responsive teaching. When educators validate students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ELLs demonstrate higher engagement, stronger identity development, and improved academic outcomes (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Shifting from deficit-based to asset-based perspectives can transform learning environments for immigrant students.

Finally, the long-term implications of language barriers extend beyond academic achievement. Students who struggle with English proficiency may face limited access to advanced coursework, reduced college readiness, and fewer career opportunities. Conversely, students who receive effective support often become bilingual or multilingual adults—an asset in an increasingly global society.

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