

REL Southwest Ask A REL Response

English Language Learners

April 2021

Question:

What is the effect of ESL certification on student achievement, language proficiency growth, and teacher evaluation ratings as determined by observation from administrators?

Response:

Thank you for the questions you submitted to our REL Reference Desk. We have prepared the following memo with research references to help answer your questions. For each reference, we provide an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the study's author or publisher. Following an established Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest research protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive study articles on the effect of English as a Second Language (ESL) certification on student achievement, language proficiency growth, and teacher evaluation ratings.

We have not evaluated the quality of references and the resources provided in this response. We offer them only for your reference. Also, we searched the references in the response from the most commonly used resources of research, but they are not comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist. References provided are listed in sections with sources in each section in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance. We do not include sources that are not freely available to the requestor.

Research References

Garrett, R., Davis, E., & Eisner, R. (2019). *Student and school characteristics associated with academic performance and English language proficiency among English learner students in grades 3–8 in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District* (REL 2019–003). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED595192>

From the ERIC abstract: “Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) has witnessed an increase in the number of English learner students in grades K-12 over recent years, with students coming from more diverse backgrounds in race/ethnicity, countries of

origin, and native language. This requires more support from the district to meet diverse needs in terms of languages, cultures, and educational supports. The Cleveland Partnership for English Learner Success—a partnership among CMSD’s Multilingual Multicultural Education office, the research office and researchers from Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest—has prioritized identifying English learner student and school characteristics associated with student achievement and language proficiency. This will provide a step toward improving district and school supports for English learner students. Student and school data from 2011/12 through 2016/17 were obtained from the district administrative records. The study examined means and percentages of student and school characteristics and student achievement of English learner students in grades 3-8 from school years 2011/12 through 2016/17. The study team examined these characteristics for English learner students in grades 3-8 each year separately, enabling the team to identify stable patterns while helping to uncover changes over time. To explore associations with achievement, the study developed a series of regression models that correlated student and school characteristics with student performance on statewide assessments while controlling for other key characteristics. The study focused on the most recent year of English learner outcomes available—2016/17—to provide information that was most relevant to the current English learner student population and educational setting. Between 2011/12 and 2016/17, English learner students in the district increasingly spoke languages other than Spanish. The percentage of English learner students enrolled in the district newcomer academy increased, while the percentage of English learner students enrolled in bilingual schools decreased. The study also found that English learner students increasingly were enrolled in schools with school climate scores higher than the district average over the study period, and that the newcomer academy consistently had school climate scores more than a standard deviation above the district average. Student special education status and lower prior year assessment performance were consistently associated with lower current student performance. English learner students speaking Arabic tended to have lower levels of English language proficiency, while gifted and female students tended to have higher English language proficiency. Students had lower mathematics achievement when they attended a school with larger numbers of English learner students per bilingual paraprofessional, and lower speaking proficiency levels when attending schools with larger numbers of students per certified ESL teacher, but these school staffing characteristics were not clearly associated with the other student outcomes studied. School climate domains were positively associated with student speaking proficiency levels, but not with most other student outcomes. The study findings suggest further work to gain a deeper understanding of how school climate may support English learner student language proficiency and achievement; examining how specialized schools like the district’s newcomer academy may support positive school climate; and considering the role of staff specialized to work with English learner students.”

Lavery, M. R., Nutta, J., & Youngblood, A. (2019). Analyzing student learning gains to evaluate differentiated teacher preparation for fostering English learners’ achievement in linguistically diverse classrooms. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(4), 372–387. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1224215>. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=seflp_pubs.

From the ERIC abstract: “Researchers compared pre/post classroom assessment scores of $n = 8,326$ K-12 students taught by $n = 288$ teacher candidates to determine if a differentiated teacher education program prepared them to support English learners’ (ELs) achievement in classrooms including native and nonnative speakers of English. Candidates in Group 1 comprised academic subject (secondary mathematics, science, and social studies) teacher candidates, who completed six teacher preparation courses with 15 key assignments that included a focus on ELs. Certification areas for Group 2 candidates include language arts instruction (elementary, early childhood, and secondary English language arts). Group 2 candidates completed from 12 to 15 courses with 41 to 50 key assignments that included a focus on ELs. Results indicate that teacher candidates in both groups helped narrow the gap between ELs and non-ELs from pretests to posttests. ELs performed no differently when taught by candidates from either group. Implications for teacher preparation are discussed.”

Loeb, S., Soland, J., & Fox, L. (2014). Is a good teacher a good teacher for all? Comparing value-added of teachers with their English learners and non-English learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(4), 457–475. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1046263>. Retrieved from https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/ELLVA_EEPA_accepted.pdf.

From the ERIC abstract: “Districts, states, and researchers are using value-added models with increasing frequency to evaluate educational policies and programs, as well as teachers and other educators individually. Despite their prevalence, little research assesses whether value-added measures (VAM) are consistent across student subgroups. Are teachers who are effective with one group of students also effective with others? If they are not, then it may be worthwhile to develop separate measures of teacher effectiveness for different student groups; if they are, a single average measure will likely suffice. Our article uses data from a large urban district with a considerable English learner (EL) population to compare teachers’ VAM with ELs to the same teachers’ VAM with non-ELs. We find that teachers who are effective with ELs also tend to be effective with their non-ELs and vice versa. We also, however, find evidence that some teachers are relatively more effective with ELs than with non-ELs, and that this increased efficacy is predicted by a teacher’s fluency in students’ home language and whether he or she possesses a bilingual teaching certification.”

Master, B., Loeb, S, Whitney, C., & Wyckoff, J. (2016). Different skills? Identifying differentially effective teachers of English language learners. *Elementary School Journal*, 117(2), 261–284. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1122206>. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529176.pdf>.

From the ERIC abstract: Nationwide, K-12 students designated as English language learners (ELLs) must learn both language and content simultaneously, and ELLs score far below the national average in math achievement. Many educators have suggested that identifying or developing teachers with skills specific to ELLs’ instructional needs may be critical to addressing this challenge. This study seeks to identify the characteristics and learning experiences of general education teachers who are differentially effective at promoting math achievement among ELLs compared to non-ELLs. Our analyses indicate that individual teachers can learn specific skills that make them more effective with ELL

students. In particular, prior experience teaching ELLs predicts improvements in novice teachers' differential instructional effectiveness with ELLs. We also find that both in-service and pre-service training focused on ELL-specific instructional strategies are associated with higher differential gains for ELLs. Our findings lend support to the notion that general education teachers can develop valuable ELL-specific instructional skills.

Ruiz de Castilla, V. (2018). *Teacher certification and academic growth among English Learner students in the Houston Independent School District* (REL 2018-284). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED580928>

From the ERIC abstract: “Aware of the challenges set before the Houston Independent school District by rapid growth in the numbers of English learner students, and a critical shortage of teachers with bilingual certification for more than a decade, members of Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest's English Learners Research Alliance sought information that districts can use when recruiting teachers and assigning them to schools and classrooms that serve large numbers of English learner students. To respond to this need, this study examined the relationships between teacher certification and growth in math and reading achievement and English proficiency among English learner students using data from the Houston Independent School District and the Texas Education Agency. The study assessed whether a teacher’s certification type—bilingual or English as a second language—and certification route—additional exam (adding a certification area to an existing classroom teaching certificate by completing an exam), alternative (receiving certification through a nontraditional route that allows one to teach while completing the requirements), postbaccalaureate (completing a university program offered to people with a bachelor’s degree or higher), or traditional (obtaining a bachelor’s degree in education from an accredited university)—were correlated with growth in math achievement, reading achievement, and English proficiency (as measured by the most recent Texas state standardized exams) among English learner students whose home language is Spanish. Key findings from the main analysis are detailed and analyzed. Stakeholders may find the results of the study useful for understanding the teacher factors related to English learner student achievement, assigning teachers to English learner student classrooms at the school level, recruiting teachers at the school or district level, and developing standards for teachers of English learner students at the state level.”

Samson, J. F., & Lesaux, N. K. (2015). Disadvantaged language minority students and their teachers: A national picture. *Teachers College Record*, 117(2), 1–26.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1047844>. Retrieved from
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279322581>.

From the ERIC abstract: “Background: Educational outcomes for language minority (LM) children are of great concern across the nation because these students have lower grades, are rated by their teachers as having lower skills, perform worse on standardized tests, and are more likely to drop out than are non-LM students. Given this context of underperformance, there is a need for educators to better understand the factors that are associated with their academic outcomes. Purpose: This national study examines

demographic and school contexts of LM students as compared to their non-LM peers to highlight the disparities between them that extend beyond language differences. A nationally representative sample of LM students and their peers participated in this study, along with their parents and teachers, beginning with kindergarten in fall 1998 and continuing in first, third, and fifth grades. In particular, data on key student variables (race, gender, etc.) and the characteristics of their teachers were examined. Teacher characteristics included: years of experience, certification status, highest educational level achieved, and specialized coursework (reading methodology and ESL). By comparing descriptive statistics for LM students and their non-LM peers, the authors hoped to identify possible factors that may contribute to the achievement gap between these two groups. Research Design: For this descriptive and comparative study using secondary data, the authors analyzed a full sample of kindergarten students, including both LM and non-LM students (n = 15,026), in order to describe key demographic variables (i.e., gender, race, SES, etc.) for the two subgroups. Proportions for each subgroup variable and Fisher's exact test results were reported, in order to determine statistically significant differences between groups for categorical variables. The analytic subsample was then restricted to students from homes in the two lowest SES quintiles to compare mean values, associated t-tests, and histograms for five dimensions of teacher background to identify differences related to LM status. Conclusions/Recommendations: This study demonstrated some of the great disparities that exist between LM and non-LM students that go beyond language differences including: 70% of LM students come from the lowest SES group versus 37% of their non-LM peers. Also, teachers of LM students had fewer years of experience and lower rates of certification than teachers of non-LM students. Finally, many teachers of LM students (as much as 50% in first grade) reported feeling inadequately prepared to teach LEP (limited English proficient) students. These findings suggest the need for careful attention in the form of educational policies that acknowledge the disproportionate effect of poverty and low SES on LM students. The negative effects of limited resources and inadequate social capital overshadow limited English proficiency and their ability to overcome academic challenges. Furthermore, it is important for education decision-makers to recognize the role that inexperienced, uncertified teachers may play in the educational outcomes of LM students.”

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- [(“ESL certification”) AND (“student achievement” OR “student performance” OR “grades”) OR (“language proficiency outcomes”) OR (“teacher performance” OR “teacher ratings”)]
- [(“ESL certification”) AND (“student achievement” OR “language proficiency” OR “teacher performance”)]
- [(“teacher ESL certification”) OR (“student”) AND (“language proficiency” OR “grades” OR “performance”)]
- (teacher ESL certification AND (grades OR achievement OR performance))

- [(“teacher performance” OR “teacher evaluation”) AND (“ESL certification”)]
- ESL certification effects
- effects of ESL certification and teacher evaluation

Databases and Resources

We searched [ERIC](#) for relevant, peer-reviewed research references. ERIC is a free online library of more than 1.8 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Additionally, we searched the [What Works Clearinghouse](#).

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

When we were searching and reviewing resources, we considered the following criteria:

- *Date of the publication:* References and resources published from 2006 to present were included in the search and review.
- *Search priorities of reference sources:* Search priority is given to study reports, briefs, and other documents that are published and/or reviewed by IES and other federal or federally funded organizations, academic databases, including ERIC, EBSCO databases, JSTOR database, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, and Google Scholar.
- *Methodology:* The following methodological priorities/considerations were given in the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized control trials, quasi-experiments, correlational studies, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, mixed methods analyses, and so forth; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected, and so forth), study duration, and so forth; and (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, and so forth.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by stakeholders in the Southwest Region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest at AIR. This memorandum was prepared by REL Southwest under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-91990018C0002, administered by AIR. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.