Synthesis of Research Literature:

Academic Disparity among the English Language Learners: The Role of Language Curricularization

Mirzohid Mamasidikov

Johns Hopkins University School of Education

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Dr. Christopher Devers

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**Introduction**

Academic disparity among English Language Learner (ELL) students has been highly researched and targeted by several encouraging educational reform policies and innovative approaches over the past few decades, yet recent studies continue to reveal a significant academic disparity between the ELLs and their English-speaking counterparts (Carnoy and García, n.d.; Carnoy, Rosa, and Simões 2022). During the process of language acquisition, ELLs face dual challenges such as acquiring the English language while also meeting the need to master content in other subjects while also adapting to new social and cultural norms. The rise of ELL population in U.S. K-12 has been steadily increasing over the last few decades. Today, the ELL population comprises over 10% of student population in the United States (Molloy Elreda et al. 2022).

Despite the attempts aimed at remediating these persistent disparities, ELLs continue to experience disparate academic outcomes and consistently scoring lower on standardized tests across all grade level (Ardasheva, Tretter, and Kinny 2012) and registering lower overall graduation rates. In typical classrooms, ELLs’ academic and linguistic development is not fully supported, in part due to fragmented educational support and inconsistent instructional strategies. Empirical studies suggest that ELLs usually perform at lower academic levels compared to non-ELLs (Callahan & Gándara 2014; Umansky, Valentino, and Reardon, n.d.). Umansky and Reardon (2014) indicate that long-term ELL students tend to experience academic stagnation due to lack of structured and cohered instructional systems. Understanding factors that lead to academic disparities help define institutional policies, learning objectives, specify content, design assessments, and establish guidelines for teaching and learning in any given educational institution. The goal is to provide structure and consistency to ELL education, to ensure that ELL students receive structured, comprehensive and organized learning experiences.

**Synthesis of Literature Related to Problem of Practice (POP)**

In U.S. schools, ELLs embark upon their own academic trajectories, yet their journeys are intertwined with various systemic factors that often delay or hinder expected academic outcomes. Literature synthesis, so far, underscored the interconnected roles of school leadership, teacher efficacy, accountability structures, and socioeconomic status (SES) as the more influential factors in shaping their educational experiences.

The academic success of ELLs is significantly shaped by the quality and orientation of ***school leadership***. School leadership plays a pivotal role in advancing or impeding the academic trajectories of ELLs. One of the drawbacks is the lack of culturally responsive leadership practices that can uphold and promote students’ linguistic and cultural identities (Menken & Solorza, 2015; Sebastian et al. 2019). Traditional leadership approaches tend to prioritize monolingual and test-centric approaches and are not bilingual programs oriented despite evidence of their benefits. Menken & Solorza (2015) and Sebastian et al. (2019) emphasized the positive impact of leaders who foster trust with multilingual communities and advocate for inclusive policies. Ideally, effective leadership should extend beyond carrying out administrative competence and should require active engagement with issues of language, culture, and systemic inequality to address the academic disparity. Leaders who engage in critical reflection on their own biases, collaborate with multilingual communities, and align school policies with inclusive pedagogical values are more likely to foster environments where ELLs can thrive academically and socially.

***Teacher efficacy***, educators’ belief in their ability to positively affect student learning, is a critical component of effective instruction, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms. As such, it is a key determinant of ELLs’ success. However, research shows that many educators feel underprepared to teach linguistically diverse students. This phenomenon can be primarily due to insufficient pre-service training in second language acquisition and culturally responsive pedagogy (Haworth, McGee, and MacIntyre 2015; Chen 2019). This gap is often attributed to limited training in culturally responsive and language-specific pedagogical strategies (Haworth, McGee, and MacIntyre 2015; Chen 2019). With such gaps in training, teachers tend to experience efficacy issues and diminished confidence and effectiveness in their pedagogical approaches, which then essentially contribute to perpetuating disparities in student outcomes.

***Accountability systems*** built on high-stakes standardized assessments further contribute to ELL marginalization in K-12 ecosystem. have garnered significant concerns regarding their impact on English Language Learners (ELLs). Although intended to ensure educational quality, accountability systems often ignore the needs and the linguistic complexity of ELL students’ learning journeys. Menken (2010) noted that high-stakes testing puts unnecessary pressures on schools to prioritize English language acquisition over content mastery and holistic content learning. This requirement effectively leads to narrowing the curriculum and marginalizing bilingual education. Jennings & Lauen (2016) added that accountability frameworks exacerbate achievement gaps, especially if assessments lack appropriate accommodations for language learners. Schools, such as Legacy Learning Center, with higher proportions of ELLs face greater challenges in meeting performance benchmarks due to language proficiency barriers, despite the academic abilities of students, thus run the risk of being unfairly penalized. This ineffective collaboration highlights a broader systemic failure to recognize ELLs’ language development as a long-term process, thus inadvertently institutionalizing disadvantage within policy structures (Ladson-Billings 2006; 2021; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdes 2004). Research calls for more linguistically responsive accountability systems that provide appropriate accommodation and recognize language development as a dynamic, long-term process.

Furthermore, literature focuses on the compounding effect of ***socio-economic status (SES)*** factors on the issues of academic disparity and deems it as a critical determinant of educational opportunity and academic outcomes, particularly among marginalized student populations, including English Language Learners (ELLs). Students from low-income families often lack access to quality schools, enrichment programs, extracurricular academic activities, and other various supportive learning environments (Snellman et al. 2015). Fernández Sanjurjo et al. (2018) also highlighted how diminished economic means limit student engagement and contribute to educational exclusion. When the SES factors applied to language barriers, ELLs face a dual burden, which is not only reflected in academic outcomes but also in reduced access to the social and ***cognitive development*** opportunities necessary for long-term success (Blair & Raver, 2012; Tudge & Winterhoff, 2010; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

The structure of school accountability and resource allocation mechanisms as further entrenching academic disparity has garnered ample attention in literature. Over the past two decades, school accountability systems have played a pivotal role in shaping educational priorities and the distribution of resources. A prominent concern in the literature is that accountability-driven policies often lead to the allocation of educational resources based on compliance metrics, such as standardized test performance or bureaucratic checklists, rather than the specific and diverse needs of students. Figlio & Loeb (2011) critiqued accountability systems that prioritize compliance metrics over student needs. They contend that accountability measurements are usually geared toward incentivizing test-prep strategies and rarely on substantive educational improvements. Their theory is further emphasized by DeAngelis et al. (2021) that the funding models that are based on procedural adherence rather than student-centered metrics often neglect the specific needs of marginalized student populations. These populations tend to have unique academic and linguistic needs that are frequently overlooked in standardized accountability frameworks (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Ladson-Billings 2020). As a result, schools, particularly those serving historically marginalized populations, may be forced to redirect their limited resources toward test preparation or administrative documentation to meet accountability requirements.

**Identifying Gaps and Extending Literature: Language Curricularization**

*How does language curricularization contribute to academic disparity among English Language Learners?*

Language curricularization refers to the process through which language becomes formally structured and standardized within educational curricula often to align with broader national or institutional academic objectives (Sosnowski, 2021). Research indicates that the mechanics of curricularization often involve narrowing the linguistic scope to fit measurable outcomes thereby marginalizing the cultural and linguistic repertoire of ELL students. Today, language curricularization has become increasingly common in U.S. schools, yet there is a glaring gap in research to help educators and policymakers to understand its long-term effects. Flores (2020) and Menken (2013) point out the lack of extensive empirical studies examining the long-term academic outcomes of specific curricularization models, the ones that specifically focus on longitudinal studies that trace students' academic progress over several years. This gap leaves policymakers and educators with insufficient evidence regarding the sustained effectiveness of these models (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2017) and often lead to reforms that fail to translate to real-world classroom dynamics (Paris & Alim, 2017). Classrooms with real-world dynamics should include students’ identities, sociopolitical contexts, and lived experiences and contribute to enhancing the linguistic repertoires of English Language Learner students. This gap further calls for teachers to adapt to various student needs, their language proficiency requirements, and community expectations. Such a pedagogical shift would require a move away from a traditional one-size-fits-all approach to integrating flexible and context specific instructional strategies.

The relationship between curricularization and culturally responsive teaching also remains largely overlooked. Paris & Alim (2017) contend that standardized approaches to language instruction may contradict the localized, student-focused methods advocated by culturally responsive pedagogy. Also, there is a gap in research on understanding the impact of curricularized language ideologies on broader school accountability systems. Curricularization often incorporates dominant language ideologies aligned with high-stakes testing and federal accountability mandates (Menken & Solorza, 2014). When integrated into formal educational policies, standards, and classroom policies, such language ideologies, which are based on socially constructed beliefs about the value and role of dominant linguistic practices, can become curricularized and thus further extend the marginalization of the ELLs.

Further research should offer an examination of language curricularization and contrasting models of language education and how these two can be harmonized to affirm and respect students' linguistic and cultural identities. As research shows, there are different approaches to language instruction that have been adopted in current educational ecosystem, such as assimilationist and pluralist approaches (Wei & García, 2016), yet insufficient attention is paid to how these models might coexist without marginalizing multilingual learners. Focusing on exploring how curricularization and language ideologies interact with institutional accountability structures could additionally help illuminate the systemic forces shaping educational practices. Furthermore, curricularization can directly shape accountability mechanisms by defining what counts as knowledge and which language practices are valued, and how educational success should be quantified. As such high-stakes assessments and standardized curricula contribute to constraining the possibilities for multilingual development. Finally, both educators and the policymakers need to recognize these intersections and how critical this understanding is for designing policies and practices that mitigate unintended consequences and promote genuine inclusivity in language education.

**Conclusion and the Theoretical Frameworks**

The literature review synthesis consistently showcased that the academic disparities experienced by English Language Learners are deeply systemic and multifaceted. Within this exploration process, several theoretical frameworks, best poised to explore and understand the academic disparity, have been considered. The purpose is to offer a critical foundation for understanding *why* these disparities persist. To more directly connect these theories to outcomes, I considered these frameworks to identify and explain how systemic shortcomings in policy and school organization disproportionately affect ELLs. Menken & Solorza (2014) found that the emphasis on English-only accountability policies led schools to undermine bilingual education programs. This pattern contradicts research supporting the benefits of dual language models (Thomas & Collier, 2002) and reflects how the existing policies often fall short of supporting equitable educational structures for all students demographics.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), contends that educational structures and accountability policies are not race-neutral but instead reproduce existing inequities by favoring dominant cultural norms (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Additionally, Ecological Systems Theory(Bronfenbrenner, 1977) explains how multiple layers of influence, such as SES, school leadership, state policies, and broader sociopolitical forces, interact to either hinder or support ELL academic success. The "microsystem" of the classroom and the "macrosystem" of federal education policy both contribute to disparities, especially in the absence of adequate systemic support for bilingual and multicultural student population.

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| Theoretical  Framework | Explains | Contribution to Understanding Curricularization | Link to Academic Disparity |
| Critical Race Theory | Structural racism | Whose knowledge is privileged in curriculum | Exposes systemic inequity |
| Sociocultural Theory | Social learning | Emphasizes interaction, scaffolding | Aligns instruction with learner needs |
| Funds of Knowledge | Cultural assets | Values home/community knowledge | Builds engagement & academic relevance |
| Ecological Systems Theory | Layered environments (micro to macro) | Highlights the multiple, interconnected systems shaping education | Shows how broader societal forces impact ELL achievement |

The VygotkianSociocultural Theory (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Tudge & Winterhoff, 2010), on the other hand, poised as a great intersection of social interaction and cultural context in learning, reiterates how these two elements serve as essential assets in ELLs’ learning journeys. Along these lines, the Funds of Knowledge framework (Moll et al. 2005) postulates that learning is socially mediated and underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating the rich cultural and linguistic experience that ELLs bring to their education.

These theoretical frameworks particularly highlight ELL students’ struggle in the larger educational ecosystem. ELLs’ needs for culturally responsive instruction are often ignored and the interactional support deemed essential for their simultaneous language and content development are often underdeveloped. Studies have shown that when ELL students’ cultural and linguistic identities are devalued, their learning opportunities become significantly restricted. There is a call for abandoning perceiving ELLs through a deficit lens and for educators to recognize and build upon their existing knowledge as an asset in curriculum and instruction. Addressing academic disparities among ELLs requires systemic change grounded in equity, cultural responsiveness, and holistic understanding. Empirical evidence shows that schools that adopt coherent and culturally sustaining models such as dual language programs or schoolwide professional development on language acquisition tend to register improved academic and linguistic outcomes (De Jong, Yilmaz, and Marichal, 2019; de Jong & Gao, 2023; Valdes 2004). These empirical findings substantiate the claim that systemic transformation, in addition to inclusive and culturally responsive instructional strategies, is necessary to narrow the academic disparity for English Language Learners.

In addition, high-stakes assessment and curricular standardization must be thoroughly analyzed as they frequently marginalize ELLs by expecting rapid English proficiency without addressing the historical and racialized barriers they encounter. These assessments are built around monolingual and monocultural norms and do not accommodate the linguistic and cultural diversity of ELL students. Menken (2010) points out how these assessments do not take ELL students’ unique linguistic development trajectories and put them at a systemic disadvantage.

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