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Economic Disadvantage and English I End-of-Course Exam Differences by Student Language Status: A Texas Multiyear Investigation

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Abstract

Analyzed in this Texas statewide study was the degree to which the language status of students in poverty was related to their performance on the state-mandated English I End-of-Course exam. Inferential statistical procedures revealed the presence of statistically significant differences in the three grade level standards (i.e., Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level) in both school years (i.e., 2017-2018, 2018-2019). Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged had statistically significantly lower percentages who met each of these three grade level standards than did non-Emergent Bilingual students who were also economically disadvantaged. Student language status clearly adversely affected their performance on this exam, along with the negative effects of poverty. Readers should note that, regardless of language status, very low percentages of these students in poverty met the Meets Grade Level and Masters Grade Level standards.

Keywords: Economically Disadvantaged, Emergent Bilingual, English I End-of-Course, STAAR assessment, Texas

1 Introduction

The Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015, was a reauthorization of President Lyndon Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. One of the critical provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act was to ensure the law "advances equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a, para. 8). In identifying students who are deemed to fall under the category of high-need students, the Texas Education Agency has established qualifiers for this student population known as At-risk students. At-risk students fall into one of the 13 categories established by the Texas Education Agency and may be at-risk of dropping out of school. Students with limited English proficiency, known as English Learners, is one of the At-risk categories. In Texas, the terms English Learners, Limited English Proficient, and, recently, Emergent Bilingual have been used to refer to students whose first language is other than English and who are in the process of acquiring English language proficiency as defined under the Texas Education Code (TEC) 29.052 (Texas Education Agency, 2022). In this article, the term Emergent Bilingual will be used to refer to this student population.

The National Center for Education Statistics published the most recent national adjusted cohort graduation rate for United States public high schools. The graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 86%, the highest graduation rate achieved on the adjusted cohort graduation rate since its inception by the U.S. Department of Education in the 2010-2011 school year. Texas is one of the eight states that had a 90% or higher graduation rate. Although these statistics may be a cause for celebration for the Texas public schools, the question remains whether these data reflect equitable education for all students. At-risk populations such as Emergent Bilingual continue to be underserved in public education.

Several researchers (e.g., Martin, 2022; Rodriguez & Slate, 2015; Sugarman & Geary, 2018) have provided evidence that public education is not meeting the academic needs of Emergent Bilingual students. These researchers, among others, have documented that Emergent Bilingual students continue to have lower levels of academic achievement than non-Emergent Bilingual students. In a recent study by Martin (2022), Grade 4 Emergent Bilingual students performed lower than their non-Emergent Bilingual peers on the Texas state-mandated writing assessment. Rodriguez and Slate (2015) documented the underperformance of Emergent Bilingual students on the Texas state-mandated reading and mathematics assessments. Sugarman and Geary (2018) established that lower percentages of Emergent Bilingual students met the Algebra I End-of-Course exam grade level standards than non-Emergent Bilingual students in the 2016-2017 school year. The underperformance of Emergent Bilingual students increases the likelihood that they will drop out of high school (Abedi, 2004; Course Crafters Inc., 2012; Genesse et al., 2005; Maxwell, 2012).

Challenges faced by Emergent Bilingual students in public education are further exacerbated by societal factors such as poverty. Researchers (e.g., Maxwell, 2012; Sheng et al., 2011) have documented that Emergent Bilingual students are more likely to come from families in poverty and are more likely to be enrolled in schools with high percentages of students in poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2004; De Cohen et al., 2005; Noguera, 2011; Yeakey, 2012) than are non-Emergent Bilingual students. Kirp (2013) asserted the increased effects of the intersectionality between race/ethnicity and poverty, referring to it as a "double whammy" (p. 6). Validating this claim, Resilla (2017) and Schleeter et al. (2020) conducted separate studies on the relationship between Emergent Bilingual academic performance and their economic status. Resilla (2017) investigated the reading and mathematics college readiness rates of Emergent Bilingual students as a function of their economic status for seven years (i.e., 2004-2005 through 2010-2011). Results from her investigation were that Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged had poorer reading and mathematics college-readiness skills than did Emergent Bilingual students who were not economically disadvantaged in six of the seven school years. In a recent Texas investigation, Schleeter et al. (2020) examined Grade 3 reading achievement on the state-mandated assessment. They documented that Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged had statistically significantly poorer reading skills than Emergent Bilingual students who were not economically disadvantaged in the three school years examined.

To further substantiate the effect of economic status on educational equity, researchers (e.g., College Board, 2011; Lee & Slate, 2014) have documented the presence of strong relationships between economic status and academic achievement. In their study, Lee and Slate (2014) determined that students who were economically disadvantaged performed more poorly on the Advanced Achievement standards than students who were not economically disadvantaged. Further revealed in this study was that only about half of the students in poverty were college ready compared to more than three-fourths of the students who were not economically disadvantaged. In another publication, the College Board (2011) reported that higher income bracket students whose family income was $100,000 and higher had higher SAT Verbal and Mathematics test scores than students from lower-income families. The current educational realities of Emergent Bilingual students and students in poverty warrant investigation. After an extensive review of the existing literature, we could not locate any published works in which the language status of students in poverty was addressed for the Texas state-mandated English I End-of-Course exam. As such, findings from this investigation will help fill in the gap in the existing research literature.

2 Purpose of the Study

In this Texas statewide investigation, the emphasis was on the relationship between student language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, non-Emergent Bilingual) of students who were economically disadvantaged and their performance on the Texas state-mandated English 1 End-of-Course exam. Specifically addressed was the degree to which student language status was related to their performance on three grade level standards: Approaches Grade Level standard, Meets Grade Level standard, and Masters Grade Level standard. These three grade level standards were analyzed for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years, the last two complete school years prior to the pandemic.

3 Significance of the Study

Findings from this multiyear statewide analysis will enhance the extant research literature available on the performance of students who are economically disadvantaged as it relates to their language status (i.e., Emergent Bilingual, non-Emergent Bilingual) on the English I End-of-Course exam. After an extensive search of the existing research literature, no published articles could be located in which the performance of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty was compared to the performance of non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty on this state-mandated assessment.

4. Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in this multiyear analysis: (a) What is the effect of language status on the English I End-of-Course exam Approaches Grade Level standard for students who were economically disadvantaged?; (b) What is the effect of language status on the English I End-of-Course exam Meets Grade Level standard for students who were economically disadvantaged?; (c) What is the effect of language status on the English I End-of-Course exam Masters Grade Level standard for students who were economically disadvantaged?; and (d) What consistencies are present on the three grade level standards by the language status of students across two school years of data analyzed? The first three research questions were answered separately by school year, whereas the last research question involved results from both school years.

5. Method

5.1 . Research Design

We used secondary data in this Texas multiyear statewide study. Accordingly, an ex post facto or causal-comparative research design was present (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). In this type of research design, it is not possible to manipulate any variables because they have already occurred. As such, cause and effect relationships cannot be made with certainty (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). The data that we analyzed in this multiyear investigation were obtained through a Public Information Request form that was submitted to and fulfilled by the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS Data Standards, 2018). We requested data for the two school years (i.e., 2017-2018 and 2018-2019) prior to the COVID pandemic. Specific variables of interest to this article were: (a) student economic status, (b) student language status, and (b) English I End-of-Course grade level standards.

5.2 Participants and Instrumentation

The sample of students whose data were analyzed in this article were students who were determined to meet the state eligibility criteria for being economically disadvantaged. Students who qualified for either the reduced price lunch meal program or who qualified for the free meal program under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program are regarded as being economically disadvantaged. Children whose families have an income of 130% or less of the Federal poverty guideline can receive free meals at school. Children whose families have an income from 131% to 185% of the Federal poverty guideline are eligible for reduced-priced meals at school (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services, 2017).

Student language status constituted our independent variable: Emergent Bilingual students and non-Emergent Bilingual students. As defined in the Texas Education Code (TEC) 29.052, Emergent Bilingual are "students who are in the process of acquiring English and have a primary language other than English" (Texas Education Agency, 2022). Participants in this article were Emergent Bilingual students and non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty who took the Texas English I End-of-Course exam in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. The number of Emergent Bilingual students in each school year was over 50,000 students, and the number of non-Emergent Bilingual students in each school year was about 150,000 students.

The three dependent variables in this article were student performance on the English I End-of-Course exam (a) Approaches Grade Level standard, (b) Meets Grade Level standard, and (c) Masters Grade Level standard. Meeting the Approaches Grade Level standard indicates that students are likely to succeed in the next grade or course (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Meeting the Meets Grade Level standard is interpreted to mean that students have a high probability of academic success in the next grade or course (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Students may still need some type of short-term and targeted academic intervention. Meeting the Masters Grade Level Category indicates that students are expected to succeed in the next grade or course. Students who perform within this category need very little to no academic intervention (Texas Education Agency, 2018).3.1 Classroom Intervention: Linguistics, Biology, and Historical Examples

6. Results

To ascertain the extent to which student economic status was related to their performance on the three grade level standards on the English I End-of-Course exam, Pearson chi-square inferential procedures were conducted. Because each grade level standard is at the nominal level (i.e., Met or Not Met) and student economic status was also at the nominal level (i.e., in poverty or not in poverty), the Pearson chi-square procedure was the appropriate inferential statistical procedure (Slate & Rojas-LeBouef, 2011). The large statewide sample of Emergent Bilingual students allowed for the sample size requirement for this procedure to be met.

Results for the Approaches Grade Level Standard

Concerning the 2017-2018 school year for the Approaches Grade Level standard, a statistically significant result was yielded, $\chi^2(1) = 14241.08$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this finding, Cramer's V, was small, .25 (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, more than two and a half times lower, met this grade level standard than did non-Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged. Almost one half of the non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty met this grade level standard, compared to less than one-fifth of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for this school year.

Table 1

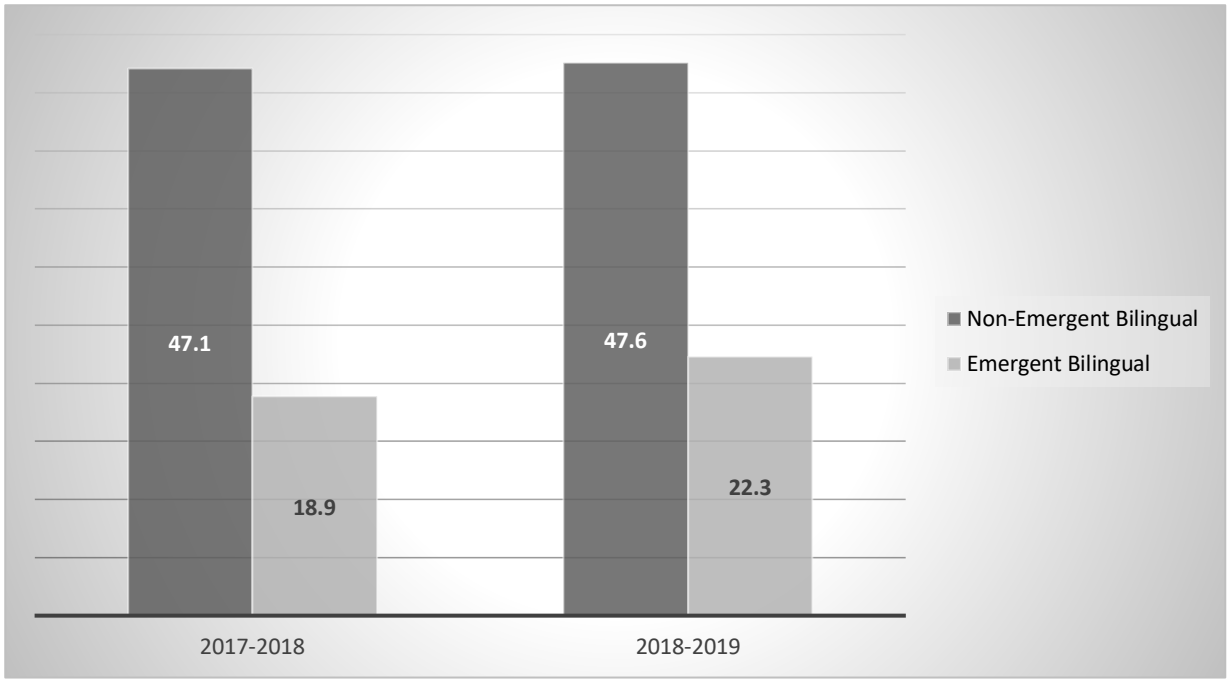
Descriptive Statistics for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 School Year English I End-of-Course Approaches Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Students in Poverty

School Year and Economic Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 46,105) 81.1%	(*n* = 10,718) 18.9%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 93,793) 52.9%	(*n* = 83,417) 47.1%
2018-2019		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 42,925) 77.7%	(*n* = 12,299) 22.3%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 77,669) 52.4%	(*n* = 70,692) 47.6%

Regarding the 2018-2019 school year at the Approaches Grade Level standard, a statistically significant difference was yielded, $\chi^2(1) = 10733.35$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V of .23, small effect size (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, more than twice as many, did not meet this grade level standard in comparison to non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty. Almost half of the non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty met this Approaches Grade Level standard, compared to less than a fourth of Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged. Delineated in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics for this school year. Depicted in Figure 1 are the consistencies in student performance across the two school years.

Figure 1

Average percentages of students in poverty who met the Approaches Grade Level standard by their language status in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.



Results for the Meets Grade Level Standard

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year for the Meets Grade Level standard, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 13299.68$, $p < .001$, small effect size, Cramer's V of .24 (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, more than four and a half times lower, met this Meets Grade Level standard than non-Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged. Almost a third of non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty met this standard, compared to a twentieth of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty who met this standard. Contained in Table 2 are the descriptive statistics for this school year.

Table 2

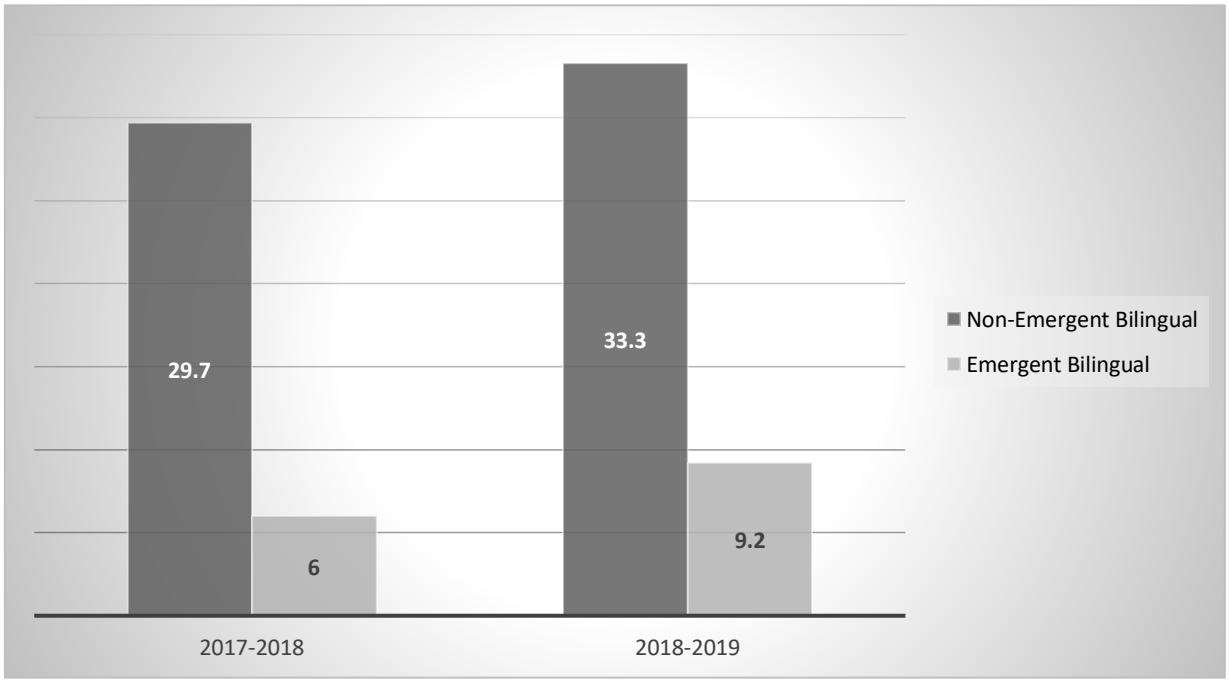
Descriptive Statistics for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 School Year English I End-of-Course Meets Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Students in Poverty

School Year and Language Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 53,429) 94.0%	(*n* = 3,394) 6.0%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 124,586) 70.3%	(*n* = 52,624) 29.7%
2018-2019		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 50,146) 90.8%	(*n* = 5,078) 9.2%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 98,990) 66.7%	(*n* = 49,371) 33.3%

Regarding the 2018-2019 school year for the Meets Grade Level standard, the difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 11912.92$, $p < .001$, a small effect size, Cramer's V of .24 (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, more than three times less, met this Meets Grade Level standard than did non-Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged. A third of the non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty met this grade level standard, compared to less than a tenth of the Emergent Bilingual students in poverty who met this grade level standard. Delineated in Table 2 are the descriptive statistics for this school year. Results for both school years are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Average percentages of students in poverty who met the Meets Grade Level standard by their language status in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.



Results for the Masters Grade Level Standard

With respect to the 2017-2018 school year for the Masters Grade Level standard, the result was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 1434.30$, $p < .001$, a below small effect size, Cramer's V of .08 (Cohen, 1988). A statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, 0.1%, met this grade level standard than did non-Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged, 2.7%. Regardless of their language status, less than 3% of students met this Masters Grade Level standard. Table 3 contains the descriptive statistics for this school year.

Table 3

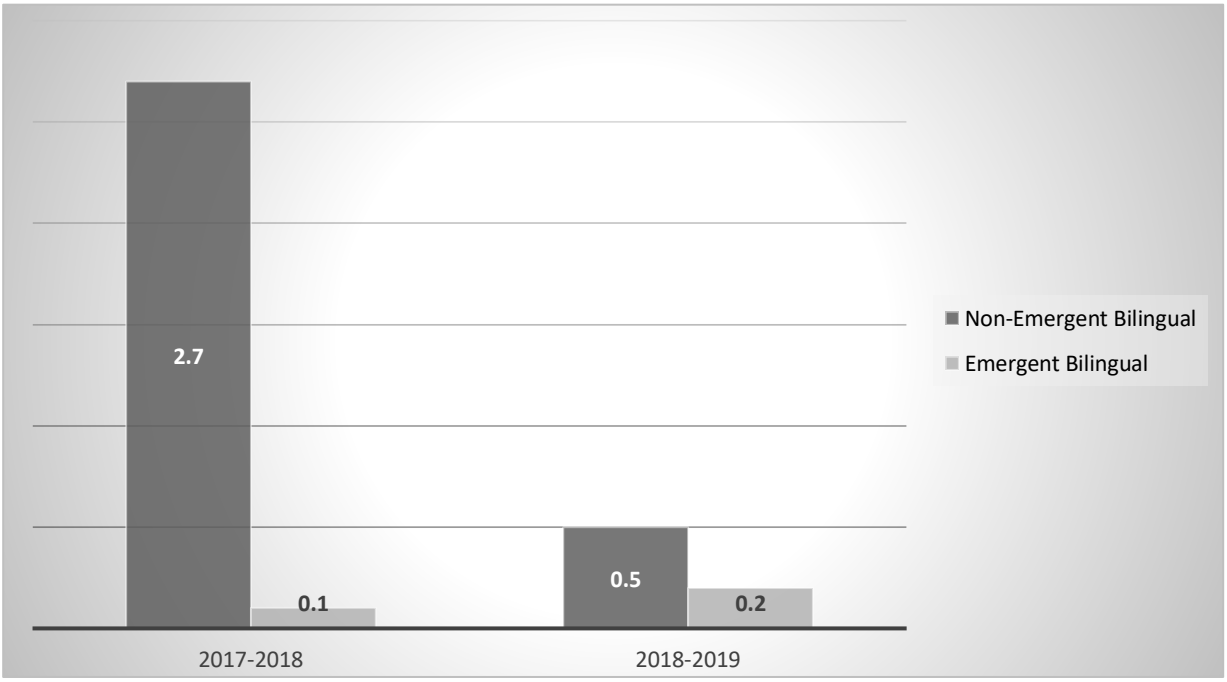
Descriptive Statistics for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 School Year English I End-of-Course Masters Grade Level Standard by the Language Status of Students in Poverty

School Year and Language Status	Did Not Meet *n* and %age of Total	Met *n* and %age of Total
2017-2018		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 56,767) 99.9%	(*n* = 56) 0.1%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 172,435) 97.3%	(*n* = 4,775) 2.7%
2018-2019		
Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 55,091) 99.8%	(*n* = 133) 0.2%
Non-Emergent Bilingual	(*n* = 141,106) 95.1%	(*n* = 7,255) 4.9%

Concerning the 2018-2019 school year for the Masters Grade Level standard, a statistically significant difference was revealed, $\chi^2(1) = 2487.38$, $p < .001$, a small effect size, Cramer's V of .11 (Cohen, 1988). Very low percentages of both groups of students met this grade level standard. The percentages were below 5% for both groups of students. Table 3 contains the descriptive statistics for this school year. The results of both school years are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Average percentages of students in poverty who met the Masters Grade Level standard by their language status in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.



7. Discussion

In this multiyear Texas investigation, we compared the performance of Emergent Bilingual students to the performance of non-Emergent Bilingual students on the state-mandated English I End-of-Course exam. Both samples of students met the Texas criteria for being economically disadvantaged. Three measures were analyzed: Approaches Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, and Masters Grade Level. At this time, each measure and student performance will be addressed.

With respect to student performance on the Approaches Grade Level standard, almost half of the non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty, about 47%, in both school years met the Approaches Grade Level standard. This percentage was more than two times greater than the 19% and 22% of Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged and who met the Approaches Grade Level standard.

Regarding the Meets Grade Level standard, a statistically significantly lower percentage of Emergent Bilingual students in poverty met this grade level standard than non-Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged. Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged performed more than four and a half times lower, 6%, in the 2017-2018 school year and three times lower, 9%, lower in the 2018-2019 school year than Emergent Bilingual students who were not economically disadvantaged. Concerning the Masters Grade Level standard, in both school years, regardless of their language status, less than 5% of students met this Grade Level standard.

7.1. Connections with the Existing Literature

Results in this study were congruent with the findings of other researchers (e.g., Martin, 2022; Rodriguez & Slate, 2015; Sugarman & Geary, 2018) on the low academic performance of Emergent Bilingual students in comparison to their non-Emergent Bilingual peers. Findings from this investigation are also commensurate with Kirp's (2013) assertion on the "double whammy" (p. 6) effects of being both economically disadvantaged and Emergent Bilingual. The results we discussed in this study may be interpreted to mean that academic gaps are present between Emergent Bilingual students and their English-speaking peers despite having the same economic and high-needs status. Once again, Emergent Bilingual students continue to experience an educational disadvantage among their peers.

7.2. Implications for Policy and for Practice

One of the provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act is specifically focused on ensuring the academic needs of highly disadvantaged students, such as Emergent Bilingual students, are met. However, the documented underperformance of Emergent Bilingual students compared to non-Emergent Bilingual students, even those students with the same economic status, need to be addressed by policymakers, education agencies, and school districts. Emergent Bilingual students living in poverty have more substantial achievement gaps and significant barriers. Addressing these barriers should not wait until these students attend school. It should begin the moment they are born. What wrap-around services such as health care, parent literacy, and community advancement opportunities are made available to these families? How are early literacy and early childhood education prioritized and advocated in these communities? What community programs are afforded to these families to bring about social mobility, and are they even aware of these government programs? Are the current barriers these families face to move up their social ladder further exacerbated by their limited English proficiency? If so, what government or community efforts are made to address this? Is generational poverty a heritage passed on from generation to generation in these households? These questions need answers if the nation truly wants to advance "equity by upholding critical protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2022, para. 8).

7.3. Recommendations for Future Research

From the findings of this empirical statewide investigation, we can provide recommendations for future research. First, we encourage researchers to extend this study to non-Emergent Bilingual students in poverty compared to Emergent Bilingual students in poverty. Second, research studies are warranted in other states to ascertain the extent to which our findings might be generalizable. Third, we recommend that data after the pandemic be examined to determine the degree of academic loss that has occurred. Fourth, we encourage researchers to extend this study to lower grade levels, such as Grades 3 and 8, both school years in Texas, in which state-mandated assessments occur. Finally, we recommend that longitudinal studies be conducted to determine the long-term effects of being both an Emergent Bilingual student and being economically disadvantaged on academic performance.

8. Conclusion

The relationship between student language status and performance on the Texas state-mandated English I End-of-Course exam on three grade level performance measures for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years was addressed for students in poverty. Lower percentages of Emergent Bilingual students who were economically disadvantaged met the three grade level standards in both school years than non-Emergent Bilingual students who were in poverty. Readers should note the very low percentages of students in both language status groups met the three grade level standards. Both student language status and poverty affect reading college readiness.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

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