Early English exposure prepares Spanish-speaking children for academic success

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By 2030, 40 percent of U.S. students will be learning English as a second language, according to the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence. These students face distinct academic challenges in the classroom, such as being unable to understand their teachers' instructions or participate in classroom discussions. Previous research has shown that if these students do not learn sufficient English early, their academic trajectories may suffer, and many drop out once they reach high school. Now, a University of Missouri researcher has found that family members, teachers and peers can play different roles in shaping Spanish-speaking children's school readiness and English skills that are all vital to children's academic success.

"It is important to study ways to increase Spanish-speaking children's English vocabulary while in early childhood before literacy gaps between them and English-only speaking children widen and the Spanish-speaking children fall behind," said Francisco Palermo, an assistant professor in the University of Missouri College of Human Environmental Sciences. "Identifying the best ways to support Spanish-speaking children's learning of English at home and at preschool can diminish language barriers in the classroom early and can help start these students on the pathway to academic success."

For the study, Palermo observed more than 100 Spanish-speaking, English-language-learning (ELL) preschoolers' interactions in their classrooms and administered standardized assessments and parental questionnaires. He found that combined English exposure at home and in

the classroom improved children's English vocabulary skills. Specifically, Palermo found Spanish-speaking preschoolers' exposure to English at home from parents allowed students to learn and express new English words, while exposure to English from classmates in preschool allowed students to practice using the new words.

Palermo found the amount of English teachers used in the classroom did not significantly contribute to ELL students' English vocabularies. The quality and diversity of teachers' English use may play a more important role than teachers' quantity of English use, Palermo said.

"Preschool is an ideal setting to study how ELL children learn language because learning in preschool occurs mainly through social interactions, and languages are learned naturally by engaging in social interactions," Palermo said. "Teachers should support children's native languages and encourage activities in the classroom that allow children to interact using English."

Palermo says the research also highlights the importance of children's English exposure through parents' interactions.

"It is important for parents with limited English proficiency to continue speaking their native languages with children and to look for situations where they, other relatives, neighbors and children's playmates can expose children to English so that they can have some familiarity with English before entering preschool," Palermo said.

In future research, Palermo hopes to examine how peer experiences, relationship quality and interactions can enhance children's English language learning and how the quality and diversity of words used by teachers in the classroom can contribute to students' English vocabulary. Although Palermo studied native Spanish speakers, he says his research could apply to all children learning English as a second language.