



INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

Vol. 1506
September 2015

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF RECLASSIFICATION

At a Glance

School districts continue to struggle with the issue of when to reclassify English language learners (ELLs) as fluent English proficient (FEP) students. Reclassifying ELLs prematurely can place them at risk for academic failure, but leaving ELLs in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs too long can also have detrimental effects. Researchers estimate that between one-quarter and one-half of this country's ELLs are classified as long-term ELLs, defined as those who have been in school for more than six years without reaching English proficiency. This Information Capsule summarizes the disadvantages of long-term ELL status and the challenges associated with the reclassification of ELLs to FEP status. Diversity in reclassification practices across states is also discussed. Research reviewed for this Information Capsule found: (1) fluency in English is one of the factors most strongly associated with students' higher academic performance; (2) students who have been reclassified as FEP tend to academically outperform students who remain classified as ELLs; and (3) students who exit ESOL programs at the earlier grade levels have greater academic success than students who exit ESOL programs at the later grade levels.

Since the 1970s, federal civil rights legislation has mandated that school districts identify English language learners (ELLs) and provide them with services that allow them to fully participate in the educational system. The intent of this requirement is to ensure educational equity for students whose limited knowledge of English prevents them from benefitting from academic instruction provided in English (Olsen, 2014; Conger, 2008; Linqanti, 2001). According to Linqanti (2001), "At the heart of this requirement is the understanding that students have the right to and the need for a meaningful education *while* obtaining proficiency in English."

ELLs are the fastest growing student population in our nation's schools. The roughly 4.7 million ELLs enrolled in U.S. K-12 schools comprise about 10 percent of the student population – an increase of over 60 percent in the last decade (Olsen, 2014). In school districts in large American cities, ELLs make up 17 percent of the student population on average (Machado, 2015).

Long-term ELLs are defined as ELLs who have been in U.S. schools for more than six years without reaching English proficiency (California Legislative Information, 2012; Olsen, 2010). An estimated one-quarter to one-half of all ELLs who enter U.S. schools in the primary grades become long-term ELLs, although no national data exist on the exact number of long-term ELLs in U.S. schools (Olsen, 2014; Estrada & Wang, 2013). Flores and colleagues (2009) reported

that 29 percent of ELLs in the Los Angeles Unified School District were never reclassified as English proficient.

Disadvantages of Long-Term ELL Status

Most researchers have suggested that long-term ELLs receive an education that is inferior to that of English proficient students. Challenges many school districts face as they attempt to address the needs of long-term ELLs include:

- Long-term ELLs are often enrolled in courses that focus on English language acquisition, rather than content, and are limited to low level, remedial course work meant to compensate for their limited language skills.
- The number of intervention and support classes in English that long-term ELLs are required to take limits their access to electives and, in some cases, science, social studies, and arts. Similarly, long-term ELLs often have less access to academic coursework that is required for high school graduation and admission to postsecondary education.
- Many long-term ELLs are segregated from their English speaking peers.
- There is a shortage of teachers trained to effectively teach ELLs.
- There is inconsistency, even within school districts, in the type of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs offered at each school. Therefore, long-term ELLs who have high levels of mobility are likely to receive inconsistent program instruction as they move from school to school.
- Few school districts have programs designed for long-term ELLs at the high school level. Typical program shortcomings include: (1) programs are similar to those that ELLs received in elementary school; (2) ELLs are often placed with newcomer ELLs in courses that are designed for new arrivals to the U.S.; (3) courses lack the curriculum and materials most appropriate for long-term ELLs; and (4) courses are often taught by teachers who are not trained to effectively teach long-term ELLs (Bear, 2015; Machado, 2015; Olsen, 2014; Estrada & Wang, 2013; Kim & Herman, 2010; Olsen, 2010; Menken et al., 2007; Echevarria, 2006; Callahan, 2005; de Jong, 2004; Linqanti, 2001).

Reclassification of Students from ELL to Fluent English Proficient Status

The most common milestone of educational progress for ELLs is reclassification from an official status of ELL to one of fluent English proficient (FEP). Flores and colleagues' (2009) study of Los Angeles Unified School District's ELLs found that the highest number of reclassifications from ELL to FEP occurred in fifth grade. However, there is a great deal of variation in the speed with which students learn English. Researchers have estimated that it takes anywhere from four to eight years for students to attain English proficiency (Bear, 2015; Education Commission of the States, 2015; Flores et al., 2009). Williams (2014) noted that there is no easy, one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how long it takes to acquire academic English proficiency.

However, he concluded, “In general, it appears to take DLLs [dual language learners] *at least* four years to develop academic English proficiency, assuming a structured, intentional program designed to support English acquisition while taking into account a child’s age and cognitive and social development.”

A study conducted by Miami-Dade County Public Schools’ (M-DCPS) Research Services Department found that the time it takes for ELLs to reach reading proficiency in English depended on the grade level of entry into ESOL programs and on the student’s initial English proficiency level. Results indicated that M-DCPS students who entered ESOL programs with the lowest level of English proficiency in grade 3 or later (the majority of students) did not have FCAT reading scores comparable to those of non-ELL students, even after four academic years of learning English. In addition, for the majority of students entering ESOL programs in ninth grade or higher, the time in high school was not sufficient to reach reading proficiency in English (Shneyderman & Froman, 2012).

Policymakers have struggled to determine the performance level students should reach in order to be reclassified – the level that maximizes students’ chances of academic success once they exit ESOL programs, but does not cut off their language supports too soon. Educators have voiced concerns that retaining ELLs in ESOL programs too long results in student placement in unchallenging remedial courses and development of low self-fulfilling expectations. On the other hand, reclassifying ELLs prematurely and withdrawing special language services and instructional supports places students at risk for academic failure, especially if teachers are unaware of or inattentive to the continuing needs of these students (Bear, 2015; Fensterwald, 2014; Hill et al., 2014; Williams, 2014; Baron, 2012; de Jong, 2004; Linquanti, 2001).

Researchers from the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing stated, “The tension between assuring that students have sufficient English language proficiency to be successful in mainstream classrooms and avoiding the potential negative consequences of protracted ELL status creates an essential dilemma in determining the optimal time for ELL reclassification” (Kim & Herman, 2010).

Some observers believe that school districts keep students in ESOL courses too long because they receive supplemental money from their state’s department of education for each ELL. They claim that school districts have a financial incentive not to reclassify ELLs until the state stops providing extra funds for ELL students, usually after about six years (Bear, 2015; Fensterwald, 2014; Roth, 2013).

Several researchers have called for a more flexible reclassification approach that considers the increased demands that will be placed on exited students and the extent to which reclassified students’ language needs can be met in the mainstream classroom. They recommend that educators move beyond the “entry/exit” and “services/no services” dichotomy that many reclassification policies encourage, noting that reclassified students may continue to need some language assistance services after they exit ESOL programs (Kim & Herman, 2010; de Jong, 2004; Linquanti, 2001).

Diversity in Reclassification Practices across States

It is difficult to compare reclassification rates across states and school districts because each state bases reclassification on different criteria and procedures. Some states and districts exit ELLs from ESOL programs on the basis of their performance on a single English proficiency

test, while others require multiple assessments and consider additional factors, such as teacher judgments and parental opinions (Bear, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; Fensterwald, 2012; de Jong, 2004; Liquanti, 2001). Williams (2014) noted that the distinctions between states' reclassification criteria "appear to be almost entirely arbitrary." He questioned: "Is there any reason to believe that DLLs [dual language learners] in Maine should have to meet a higher bar – on the same assessment – for reclassification than DLLs in Illinois or North Dakota?"

Studies have found that districts using more stringent reclassification criteria have lower reclassification rates. Conversely, those using less rigorous criteria exit greater percentages of ELL students from ESOL programs (Bear, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; de Jong, 2004).

- Estrada and Wang's (2013) study of ELLs in two California school districts found that every added requirement for ELL reclassification reduced the percentage of students meeting the criteria. Their findings led the researchers to conclude that "ELL status is defined by district and school context, within broad state guidelines. An ELL who in one district, or even a particular school, garners the mantle of success that reclassification signifies might, in another context, instead become long-term ELL and garner the negative mantle of failure."
- Hill and colleagues (2014) found that California districts that used stricter criteria than recommended in state guidelines had a higher percentage of students scoring at the proficient level or higher on state achievement tests and a greater likelihood of on-time grade level progress. The researchers cautioned, however, that it is "important to question whether the outcomes are sufficiently improved to justify the much lower district reclassification rates that result."
- Some state policies make it more likely that ELLs will be reclassified before they are ready for mainstream instruction. For example, in Illinois, one-third of ELLs test out of language services in less than one year and almost 60 percent are reclassified in less than three years. However, as noted earlier, studies indicate that ELLs generally need much more time (at least four to eight years) to fully develop academic proficiency in English (Williams, 2014).

The criteria used to exit ELLs from ESOL programs in all Florida school districts, including M-DCPS, are specified in State Board of Education rule. Florida uses the following exit criteria, dependent upon student grade level:

- Kindergarten–Grade 2: English language proficiency test (the CELLA, or Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment, through 2014-2015, and the ACCESS for ELLs, or Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for ELLs, starting in 2015-2016).
- Grades 3-10: English language proficiency test and English language subtest of the Florida Standards Assessment.

- Grades 11 and 12: English language proficiency test and satisfaction of graduation requirements in reading, through the FSA or another assessment, such as the SAT or ACT.

If a Florida student does not receive the test scores needed to qualify for exit from the ESOL program, the student's teacher, counselor, administrator, or parent may request that the student be reevaluated for English language proficiency. An ELL Committee is then formed to review the student's academic record holistically, considering a variety of criteria, such as test results from other assessments, grades from the current or previous years, and prior academic and social experiences. If a majority of the ELL Committee determines that the student is FEP, the student is exited from the ESOL program. Parent preferences are also considered in the Committee's final decision. The Florida State Board of Education's Rule 6A-6.0903, *Requirements for Exiting English Language Learners from the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program*, can be accessed at <https://www.flrules.org/gateway/ruleno.asp?id=6A-6.0903&Section=0>.

Linquanti (2001) concluded that reclassification procedures in many schools and districts are inadequate, and can undermine accountability and equity for the following reasons:

- Educators in many school districts use norm-referenced tests (NRTs) to measure English proficiency. However, NRTs were developed as indicators of grade level academic achievement and were not intended as measures of language proficiency or fluency. In addition, experts agree that it is not valid to assess ELLs using tests that were normed on mainstream, monolingual English speakers.
- Some school districts do not coordinate the timing of multiple assessments used for reclassification purposes. For example, many districts rely on both state achievement tests and district-administered oral language proficiency tests to determine English proficiency. A student may receive a high score on his or her oral language proficiency test in November, but have to wait until the following spring before taking the statewide English language arts (ELA) test. Even if a student receives a high score on the spring ELA test, he or she is usually not reclassified until the fall of the following school year because test results are typically not received from the state until June.
- The reclassification rate from ELL to FEP is one of the most commonly referenced statistics used to evaluate the effectiveness of districts serving ELL populations. However, calculation methods usually fail to consider critical factors that influence a student's likelihood of reclassification, such as his or her age, grade level, literacy level, prior schooling, mobility, and time in the U.S.

Research Comparing ELL and FEP Student Performance

Studies have consistently found that ELLs on average have less academic success than their peers who are fluent in English (Olsen, 2014; Estrada & Wang, 2013; Romo, 2013; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011; Kim & Herman, 2010; Menken & Kleyn, 2009; de Jong, 2004).

- The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) reported that in 2011, the achievement gaps between ELLs and non-ELLs on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment were 36 points at the fourth grade level and 44 points at the eighth grade level. The achievement gaps at both grade levels remained relatively unchanged since those reported in 2002.
- Flores and associates' (2009) study of Los Angeles Unified School District students concluded that fluency in English was one of the factors most strongly associated with higher standardized test scores, lower rates of grade retention, greater participation in Advanced Placement courses, and lower dropout rates.
- A longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing found that ELLs had higher dropout rates than FEP students (25 percent versus 15 percent). The study, conducted in an unidentified state, also found that ELL and FEP students dropped out of school for different reasons. ELLs' dropout rates were more strongly associated with their poor academic performance, and especially grade retention. In contrast, FEP students' dropout rates were more strongly associated with background and behavioral factors, such as free or reduced price lunch status, number of school transfers, and number of disciplinary infractions (Kim, 2011).

Research on the Impact of Reclassification on Students' Academic Performance

Researchers have found that reclassified students outperform students who remain classified as ELLs, regardless of their previous levels of academic performance. In addition, studies have found that students who exit ESOL programs at the earlier grade levels have more academic success than students who exit ESOL programs at the later grade levels.

- The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing tracked the academic progress of three cohorts of ELL students after they were reclassified as FEP. Students from 38 districts in one unidentified state were included in the study. The researchers found a general trend in both reading and mathematics that indicated more rapid average growth rates for reclassified ELLs than English only students, holding constant prior levels of academic performance. In other words, reclassified ELLs tended to catch up academically with their English only peers as they progressed through the grade levels, although their gains were in some cases very modest. Secondly, the study found no evidence that ELLs fell behind academically after reclassification, either relative to their English only peers or in terms of absolute academic proficiency levels (Kim & Herman, 2010).
- Hill and colleagues (2014) conducted a longitudinal analysis of ELLs in all of California's school districts. The study tracked four cohorts of students in grades 2, 4, 7, and 8 from 2007-2008 through 2012-2013. The researchers controlled for systematic differences in student and school district characteristics. They found that reclassified ELLs outperformed continuing ELLs and often performed better than native English speakers on the California Standards Test English-Language Arts (CST ELA). In addition,

students reclassified at the elementary grades were more likely to have higher CST ELA scores than students reclassified at higher grade levels.

Hill and colleagues also found that continuing ELLs were much less likely than other students to advance one grade level per school year. Seventy-four percent of continuing ELLs progressed on time to 12th grade, compared to 80 percent of English only students and 81 percent of initially FEP students. Reclassified FEP students, regardless of when they were reclassified, had the highest rate of on-time progression to 12th grade (82 percent). In addition, continuing ELLs were found to be the most likely to leave high school without graduating (7 percent), compared to between one and two percent of English only students, initially FEP students, and reclassified FEP students.

- The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute study of over 28,000 Los Angeles Unified School District ELLs found that students who were reclassified by eighth grade into mainstream English classrooms performed significantly better on all academic indicators than ELLs who were not reclassified by eighth grade. Even after controlling for previous academic performance, reclassification at any point during the elementary or middle school grades was associated with improved academic outcomes on standardized reading and math tests, and the California High School Exit Exam. In addition, reclassified students were more likely to enroll in Advanced Placement courses and less likely to be retained in ninth grade or drop out of school (Flores et al., 2009).
- de Jong (2004) examined the role of two variables – length of program participation and grade level exited – on students in a Northeastern U.S. school district. The study included students who were recommended for exit from ESOL or bilingual programs during or after kindergarten and who took the state’s standardized achievement tests in grade 4 or 8. While it is often assumed that students who remain in ESOL programs longer have greater academic difficulties, this study found that length of participation in ESOL programs was not a significant predictor of former ELLs’ academic success on the state’s English language arts, mathematics, and science achievement tests. Exit grade level, on the other hand, was found to play a significant role in predicting students’ academic success. The higher the grade level that students exited ESOL programs, the lower their scores on the 4th grade state tests in English language arts and science. Similarly, students who exited ESOL programs at higher grade levels had lower scores on the state’s 8th grade science test.
- A longitudinal study by the New York City Board of Education (2000) suggested that grade of ESOL program entry and exit may play a role in predicting ELLs’ success after program exit. The study tracked the educational progress of cohorts of New York City public school students who entered ELL programs in kindergarten and grades 1-3, 6, and 9. Researchers found a strong relationship between grade of entry and the percentage of students meeting ESOL program exit criteria. Students who entered ESOL programs in the early grades (kindergarten and grades 1-3) exited ESOL programs faster and in larger cumulative percentages than students who entered ESOL programs in the higher grade levels. The sixth grade cohort was the least successful of

all the cohorts – less likely to reach the program exit criterion than students who entered ESOL programs in kindergarten or grades 1-3 and less likely to graduate from high school than students who entered ESOL programs in grade 9.

- The National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing conducted a longitudinal study of one unidentified state's ELL students. After controlling for students' levels of academic achievement, behavioral issues, student background characteristics, and school district factors, one variable remained consistently significant – the number of years designated as ELL as a proportion of the number of years enrolled in the school district. ELL students who were reclassified earlier had lower dropout rates – 15 percent among students reclassified in grade 2 or before, 22 percent among students reclassified in grade 5 or before, and 33 percent among students reclassified in high school (Kim, 2011).

Summary

It is estimated that between one-quarter and one-half of all English language learners (ELLs) who enter U.S. schools in the primary grades become long-term ELLs. Long-term ELLs are defined as students who have been in school for more than six years without reaching English proficiency. Experts are concerned that many ELLs who remain in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs too long receive an education that is inferior to that of English proficient students. On the other hand, reclassifying ELLs prematurely can place students at risk for academic failure.

This Information Capsule summarized the disadvantages of long-term ELL status, such as the large number of required intervention and support classes that limit access to electives and higher level coursework, the segregation of ELLs from their English speaking peers, and a shortage of teachers trained to effectively teach ELLs.

Challenges associated with the reclassification process were reviewed. For example, there is no easy, one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how long it takes to acquire academic English proficiency. Educators have therefore struggled to determine the performance level at which students should be reclassified in order to ensure their academic success after language supports end.

The diversity of reclassification policies across states was also discussed. Because of the wide range of criteria and practices used, researchers have been unable to compare reclassification rates across states and school districts. In general, studies have found that states and districts using more stringent reclassification criteria have lower reclassification rates. Conversely, those using less rigorous criteria exit greater percentages of ELLs from ESOL programs.

Research comparing the academic performance of ELL and fluent English proficient students was summarized. Studies have consistently found that fluency in English is one of the factors most strongly associated with higher performance on academic measures, including standardized achievement tests and graduation rates.

Finally, research on the impact of reclassification on students' academic performance has found that students who are reclassified as English proficient outperform students who remain classified as ELLs, regardless of their previous levels of academic achievement. A number of

studies have also found that students who exit ESOL programs at the earlier grade levels have higher levels of academic success than students who exit ESOL programs at the later grade levels.

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