

English learner students: A diverse group deserves differentiated services

Three recent REL West studies confirmed that English learner (EL) students are a diverse group and may benefit from differentiated programs and services to support their varied educational needs.

Overview

Across the United States, there is widespread concern about how to effectively educate the growing number of English learner (EL) students, particularly because they need to learn both English and academic content simultaneously. A deeper understanding of this diverse group of students could help policymakers and practitioners identify areas for targeted support to improve their learning outcomes and help close the achievement gap between EL students and their non-EL counterparts.

Building on previous research that has found variation in outcomes across different groups of EL students,¹ three recent REL West studies found variations in EL students' achievement based on students' demographic and linguistic characteristics — reinforcing the notion that different groups of EL students would likely benefit from differentiated and targeted programs and services.²

The findings described in this brief provide evidence that state and local education policymakers and practitioners can use to inform decisions about programs and services to help EL students succeed academically.

Box 1. Overview of three recent REL West studies

Study 1 examined the percentages of EL students who, over six years of schooling (2006/07 through 2011/12), were reclassified as English proficient and who passed the core subject content test at least once in English language arts and math for three cohorts (kindergarten, grade 3, and grade 6) of EL students.³

Study 2 analyzed the relationship between EL students' English language proficiency and their subsequent performance on statewide English language arts and math content tests for two cohorts (grade 3 and grade 6) of EL students from 2009/10 through 2011/12.⁴

Study 3 examined four-year high school graduation rates across different groups of EL students for a single cohort of grade 9 EL students from 2010/11 through 2013/14.⁵

Findings

EL students who had a lower initial English proficiency level, were eligible for special education services, or were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch programs had lower passing rates on their English language proficiency assessments and content tests than their counterparts.

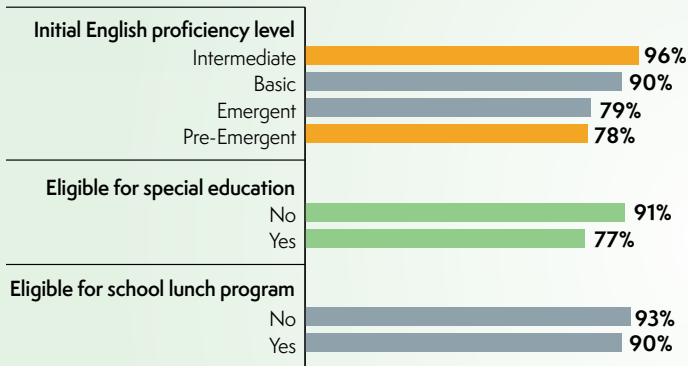
These findings held true in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah among all of the grade-level student groups in the study. For instance:

- ◇ In Arizona, for students who started the study in kindergarten the largest difference in cumulative passing rates on the English language proficiency assessment by grade 5 was between EL students at the *intermediate*

level of English proficiency (who had a 96 percent passing rate) and EL students at the *pre-emergent* level (78 percent passing rate; figure 1).



Figure 1. For EL students who began the study in kindergarten, the largest differences in cumulative passing rates on the English language proficiency assessment by grade 5 were associated with initial English language proficiency level and with eligibility for special education services, Arizona, 2006/07–2011/12



Source: Analysis of student data from Arizona Department of Education.

Younger EL students did better than older EL students on academic content tests.

Across all three states in study 1, EL students in lower grade levels did better than EL students in higher grade levels on both English language arts and math content tests. For instance:

- ◇ In Nevada, 66 percent of students who began the study in kindergarten passed the reading content test at least once over the course of the study, compared to 61 percent of students who began the study in grade 3, and 34 percent of students who began the study in grade 6.

EL students with higher English language proficiency levels had higher passing rates on subsequent English language arts and math content tests.

In both Arizona and Nevada, study 2 revealed that higher English language proficiency levels were associated with higher passing rates on subsequent content-area tests. For instance:

- ◇ Only 12 percent of Arizona EL students who began the study in grade 3 at the *basic* proficiency level passed the English language arts content test at least once in the two years (grade 4 or 5) following the English language proficiency assessment, compared with 58 percent in the study who began grade 3 at the *intermediate* level, and 96 percent in the study who began grade 3 at the *proficient* level.

EL students who were classified as fluent English proficient earlier in their schooling had a higher probability of success in mainstream English-only classes and in content-area assessments.

In study 2, EL students who achieved fluent English proficiency in grade 3 had higher passing rates on the English language arts and math content tests in the two years following the English language proficiency assessment than EL students who did in grade 6.

Box 2. English learner student group classifications

The students in study 3 were classified into five student groups according to the number of years they spent as English learners and the grade in which they were reclassified. The group definitions are based on criteria from a study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.⁶

Long-term English learner students. Students who were first designated as EL students at some point prior to grade 6 and had spent four or more years as EL students in Arizona by the time they entered grade 9.

New English learner students. Students who were first designated as EL students in grade 6 or later and had spent one to three years as EL students in Arizona by the time they entered grade 9.

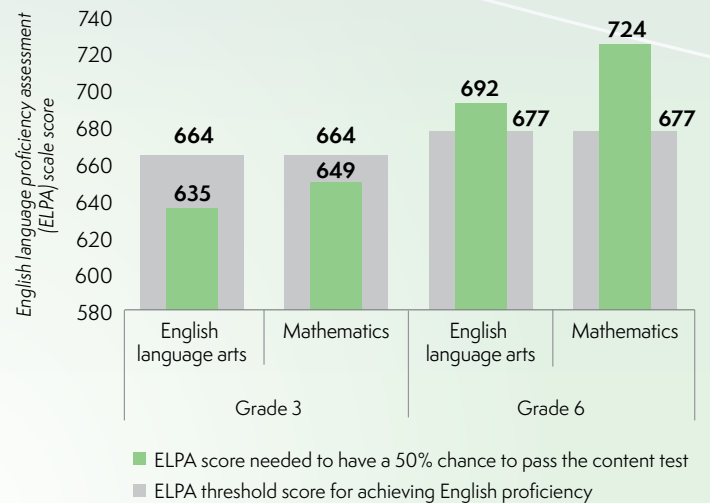
Recently proficient former English learner students. Former EL students who had been reclassified as fluent English proficient in grades 6–8.

Long-term proficient former English learner students. Former EL students who had been reclassified as fluent English proficient in grades 2–5.

Never-English learner students. Students who were either never classified as English learner students in Arizona (these students include native English speakers), or were reclassified as fluent English proficient in Arizona prior to grade 2, or were reclassified in any grades K–8 in other states before moving into Arizona.

In addition, on the English language proficiency assessment, grade 6 EL students had to score above the threshold required for reclassification as English proficient in order to have a 50 percent chance of passing the statewide content tests in grade 7 or 8. By contrast, grade 3 EL students could score below the proficiency threshold and still have a 50 percent probability of passing the content tests in grade 4 or 5 (for example, see figure 2 for data on the study’s Arizona students).

Figure 2. Grade 6 EL students — but not grade 3 EL students — had to score above the English proficiency threshold in order to have a 50 percent chance of passing the statewide content tests in subsequent years, Arizona, 2009/10–2011/12



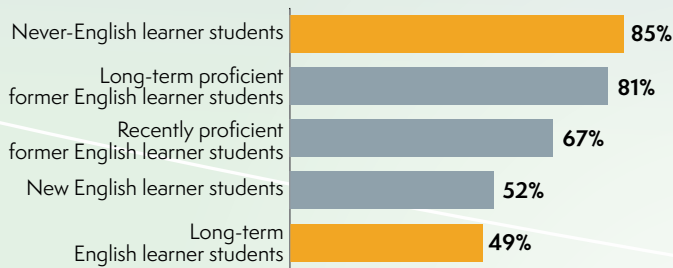
Source: Analysis of student data from the Arizona Department of Education.

The earlier that EL students achieved English language proficiency, the higher their graduation rates.

Study 3 examined four-year high school graduation rates across different groups of EL students (see box 2 for definitions of each group) in Arizona who began the study in grade 9. The study found that *never-EL students* had a four-year graduation rate of 85 percent, followed by *long-term proficient former EL students* at 81 percent, *recently proficient former EL students* at 67 percent, and *new EL students* at 52 percent. *Long-term EL students* had the lowest observed graduation rate at 49 percent (figure 3).



Figure 3. Long-term EL students had an observed four-year graduation rate 36 percentage points lower than never-EL students, Arizona, 2014



Source: Analysis of data from the Arizona Department of Education.

Academic achievement prior to high school explained most of the differences in graduation rates across EL student groups, and may have been a key factor driving graduation outcomes.

Study 3 revealed that prior academic achievement — rather than student demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch programs — accounted for most of the variation in graduation rates across the EL student groups.

The study’s results suggest that the predicted graduation rates for the EL student groups would be similar if all of the students had similar demographic characteristics and similar prior academic achievement.

Implications for policy and practice

Findings from the three recent REL West studies reinforce that the academic outcomes and educational needs of EL students are complex, with variations based on their particular characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, eligibility for special education services, initial English proficiency level, grade level, time of first designation as an EL student, and time of reclassification as English proficient. When

educators and policymakers are making decisions about how to effectively serve the various EL student groups at the state, district, and school levels, it is important to consider EL students’ unique needs, disaggregated by these characteristics.

Disaggregating EL students by their characteristics may help educators and policymakers identify which group of EL students would benefit from additional targeted supports and services to improve their English language acquisition and academic performance.

Evidence from the studies highlighted in this brief suggests that the following groups in particular may need additional or targeted supports and services: EL students in higher grade levels, EL students eligible for special education services, and EL students with lower initial proficiency levels. The new reporting requirements and recommendations under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA Section 3121) include disaggregating EL students by various groups (such as EL students with disabilities, long-term EL students, and newly arrived EL students), which may promote this practice at state, district, and school levels.

Because EL students who achieved English proficiency earlier generally had better education outcomes, educators and policymakers may want to consider strategies to help all EL students reach English proficiency as early as possible.

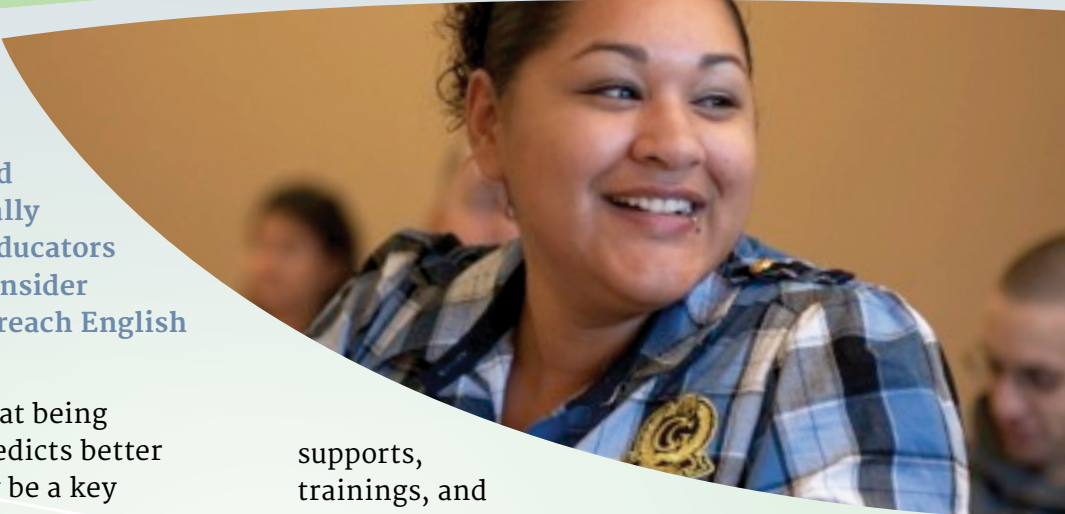
The studies in this brief suggest that being fluent English proficient earlier predicts better academic achievement, which may be a key factor driving students' graduation outcomes. Therefore, educators and policymakers may want to consider targeting supports and services aimed at helping all EL students reach both English language proficiency and academic English proficiency⁷ as early as possible.

Because EL students in secondary school (grades 6–12) often struggle more than younger EL students, extended or more effective supports may be needed to help older EL students succeed in school.

The REL West studies found that EL students in secondary school — particularly long-term EL students and newly arrived EL students with limited or interrupted schooling — struggled with grade-level academic content and had poor graduation outcomes. Thus, even after being reclassified as fluent English proficient, secondary EL students may need extended supports or more effective supports than their existing services.

Educators could benefit from access to effective programs and practices, along with related professional development, targeted to meet the unique needs of different EL students in their classrooms.

The studies' findings suggest that educators and policymakers might want to consider offering targeted programs and services to specific groups of EL students. Providing teachers with the



supports, trainings, and materials needed to effectively implement such programs and services could help them better support the academic achievement of their EL students.

Endnotes

1 For example: Flores, S. M., Batalova, J., & Fix, M. (2012). *The education trajectories of English language learners in Texas*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-trajectories-english-language-learners-texas>; Freeman, D. E., & Freeman, Y. S. (2007). *English language learners: The essential guide*. New York, NY: Scholastic; Gwynne, J., Pareja, A. S., Ehrlich, S. B., & Allensworth, E. M. (2012). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago Public Schools: A focus on English language learners?* Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago. Retrieved from https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/ELL%20Report_o.pdf

2 Although these studies examined the EL student population using assessment results prior to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the findings still may offer insights on how to better serve this diverse student group in the Common Core era.

3 This study was conducted for Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, with separate reports published for

each state. Not all the findings from these three states are included in this brief. Haas, E., Tran, L., Huang, M., & Yu, A. (2015). *The achievement progress of English learner students in Arizona* (REL 2015-098); Haas, E., Huang, M., Tran, L., & Yu, A. (2016). *The achievement progress of English learner students in Nevada* (REL 2016-154); Haas, E., Huang, M., Tran, L., & Yu, A. (2016). *The achievement progress of English learner students in Utah* (REL 2016-155). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from <https://relwest.wested.org/resources/225>

4 Haas, E., Tran, L., & Huang, M. (2016). *English learner students' readiness for academic success: The predictive potential of English language proficiency assessment scores for English learner students in Arizona and Nevada* (REL 2017-172). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2017172.pdf

5 Huang, M., Haas, E., Zhu, N., & Tran, L. (2016). *High school graduation rates across English learner student subgroups in Arizona* (REL 2017-205). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2017205.pdf

6 Gwynne et al. (2012).

7 *Academic English proficiency* refers to being successful in mainstream English-only classrooms and being proficient on statewide content assessments. For example, see: Cook, H. G., Boals, T., & Lundberg, T. (2011). Academic achievement for English learners: What can we reasonably expect? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(3), 66-69; Hakuta, K., Butler, Y. G., & Witt, D. (2000). *How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency?* (Policy Report No. 2000-1). Berkeley, CA: The University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Retrieved from http://cmmr.usc.edu/FullText/Hakuta_HOW_LONG_DOES_IT_TAKE.pdf

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