
Research to Improve Outcomes for English Learners



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Preface

When we launched the reducing inequality initiative in February 2014, we identified immigrant-origin status as a key dimension of inequality in a number of academic outcomes and in other measures such as family income distribution, child poverty, and residential segregation. English learners (ELs) are a critical subgroup of immigrant-origin children and youth. With the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015¹, there is an opportunity to improve academic outcomes among ELs. In this essay, I make the case that ESSA presents an opportunity to build knowledge that will reduce unequal academic outcomes among ELs. The rest of this essay is based on conversations that I have had with leading EL practitioners, policymakers and researchers. The lines of further inquiry for reducing inequality suggested here are intended as a strategy to stimulate, not end the conversation. We welcome other path-breaking ideas from the field.

¹ This is the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965.

Learning English in the Era of the Every Student Succeeds Act

The English learner (EL) population constitutes ten percent of all PK-12 students in the United States and is a critical segment of immigrant-origin youth. While ELs have the advantage of speaking a language other than English at home, they also need additional supports in order to help them master core content taught in English as they transition into schools.

ESSA presents a unique opportunity to improve outcomes among English learner students. ESSA foregrounds EL students in our K-12 state accountability systems in three key ways. First, English language proficiency is now included in accountability under Title I. This is significant, as the Title I program provides supplementary federal funds to local educational agencies and schools with large percentages of low-income students as a strategy to improve their academic outcomes. Under ESSA, Title I schools continue to be held accountable for showing progress in the reading and math achievement and graduation rates of all their students, including ELs. The key shift is that ESSA requires states also to include English language proficiency in Title I, moving it from Title III, which covered only ELs and was seen as a separate and secondary accountability mechanism. With the shift to Title I, standards and assessment for English language proficiency are placed at the forefront of states' accountability plans, on par with academic standards and their assessment (Hakuta, 2016). Under ESSA, schools now have to report on and show progress in the English language proficiency of their EL students. The driving premise is that this information will help schools provide services that will improve EL academic achievement.

Second, states must provide standardized entrance and exit procedures for determining how students statewide are initially identified as ELs and how ELs are subsequently reclassified as fluent English proficient (Pompa, 2015; ESSA Section 3113(b)(2); Linquanti, Cook, Bailey, & MacDonald, 2016). Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the precursor to ESSA, reclassification was a local decision, often taking place at the district or school level. This has translated into variability across locales. Even today, a student can be designated as an EL in one district, but reclassified as English

proficient in another district in the same state (Ragan & Lesaux, 2006; Linquanti & Hakuta, 2012; Hill, Weston, & Hayes, 2014).

Third, ESSA expands the EL category in state academic assessments. States can now include former ELs in the EL category for “up to 4 years after they have been reclassified” (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017, pp. 2-14). While there were previously no benchmarks in the law, in practice, former ELs were frequently included only up to two years. The four year span affords a bigger window through which to see EL academic progress after reclassification. While this expansion represents a good start, there is still the need for a more nuanced EL category in datasets, as we will show here. This includes capturing EL outcomes over the longer academic pipeline (beyond the four years following reclassification) and the developmental span and tapping into the diversity of EL subgroups.

In this essay, we focus on two key components of these new accountability systems that would benefit from further research: **1-developing better assessments** and **2-broadening and deepening the data about ELs**.

To catalyze research that better responds to EL needs, we need better data that reflect the heterogeneity of the EL population and their needs. Who is the EL population, and how are they faring in school? This is critical to know if we are to develop policies, practices, and programs that can improve EL outcomes. On the surface, this question sounds simple to answer, but in fact, achievement gaps can look quite different—depending on which ELs are being compared to their monolingual English peers. The achievement gaps between current EL students and their monolingual English peers are longstanding and substantial (August, Estrada, & Boyle, 2012). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that the gap in eighth-grade math scores stayed the same at about 40 points from 2000 to 2013. The average reading NAEP scores for fourth- and eighth-grade ELs have been lower than their non EL peers since 1998 (Takanishi & Le Menestrel, 2017). In 2015, the reading gap between EL and non EL fourth graders was 36 points, and

in the eighth grade, 44 points. However, a comparison of former ELs to their monolingual English peers presents substantially reduced gaps. Former ELs, both in 4th grade reading and in 8th grade math, have scores that look much more like non-ELs than ELs (Murphey, 2014).

At the same time, we should recognize that current and former ELs are highly diverse populations unto themselves. Among current ELs, there are long-term English learners who are still not reclassified as proficient in English even after several years (Olsen, 2014). This seems to signal that these students are not getting the services they need to succeed. For instance, in a large urban California district, even kindergartner ELs who enter with relatively high levels of English proficiency do poorly in math and English language arts standardized tests from 2nd through 10th grades; the effect is most pronounced when they are placed in “general education classrooms with monolingual English speakers,” or English immer-

sion programs (Umansky, 2016). Among former ELs, test scores may start to decline shortly after reclassification or a few years later (Slama, 2014), which can result in early high school dropout rates (Cimpian & Thompson, 2016; Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski, 2017). This seems to signal that the students were reclassified too early and/or needed additional supports that they did not receive in later grades.

By moving accountability systems from the federal to the state level and highlighting the importance of EL progress in accountability, ESSA provides an opportunity to develop state accountability systems that better support the learning of ELs. Assessments and data are critical pieces of these systems—future research focusing on these areas promise to yield a more nuanced picture of how ELs are doing and why, as well as what can be done to spur and sustain their academic progress.

Accountability: How We Got Here

Proficiency standards were introduced into state accountability in 2002 with No Child Left Behind. NCLB ushered in a new era of federal involvement in elementary and secondary education, along with a new era of accountability tied to higher academic standards and standardized tests for students (Louie, 2005). NCLB mandated the addition of language and mathematics tests for more grades and a science assessment (Shaul & Ganson, 2005).²

The specific NCLB mandates that are particularly relevant to this essay are the annual testing of students in Grades 3–8 in reading and mathematics, and at least once in Grades 10–12; and the reporting of school data on students’ test performance along the lines of race/ethnicity, special education, Limited English Proficient status (the federal term formerly used to describe a K–12 student’s eligibility for state second-language/bilingual services, regardless of whether the student was actually placed in those services), or low-income status (Karen, 2005). According to NCLB, ELs’ challeng-

es with speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English mean that they do not have the ability to attain proficiency on state content area assessments, such as English language arts or math; to succeed in classrooms where the content is taught in English; or to have full participation in society (Cook, Boals, & Lundberg 2011, p. 67).

NCLB mandated that English language proficient (ELP) and English language developmental (ELD) standards had to correspond with the standards for academic subjects, and, further, that ELP tests must correspond with those ELP/D standards. This marked a significant shift in “what ELP assessments measure” (Boals et al., 2015, p. 1). Prior to NCLB, local educational agencies that had used ELP assessments relied on commercially developed ELP assessments. These centered on oral language, vocabulary, and basic English grammar, and did not typically include measures of progress in language development (Bailey & Huang, 2011; Boals et al., 2015).

² For a brief history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and its successor, NCLB, around academic standards, standardized test scores, and accountability of local educational agencies for student achievement, see Thomas and Brady (2005). As the authors note, it was not until 1988 that “public school districts across the nation were required to annually assess student academic “progress on the basis of standardized test scores” (54).

NCLB also introduced the need for ELP assessments to include academic language proficiency. Academic language is what students need to learn to understand academic materials, or, more specifically, to “make sense of complex content, articulate their understanding of that content in academic forms, and assess their own growing understanding” (Cook, Boals, & Lundberg, 2011: 66). Each discipline has its own set of “specialized vocabulary, grammatical structures, and discourse features” (Cook, Boals, & Lundberg, 2011, p. 66).

However, it became clear early on that states lacked the technical capacity or experience to formulate the NCLB mandated standards. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of NCLB, ELP assessments were developed before stakeholders knew fully what these tests should look like (Abedi, 2008). English language proficiency standards varied significantly between states (Wolf & Faulkner-Bond, 2016). To spur the development of ELP assessments that met NCLB requirements, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored a series of competitions for Enhanced Assessment Grants (EAGs) to support assessment consortia (Boals et al., 2015). Today, WIDA (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment) includes members of 36 state education agencies, and ELPA21 (English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century) includes 10 states. California, Texas, and New York are a few states with large EL student populations that use their own EL standards and assessments.

ELs are assessed annually on ELP until they satisfy the score required for one or multiple criteria allowing them to join classes where the language of instruction is English, without specialized language and academic supports and services. Today, thirty states are using only ELP assessments to determine reclassification; the other 20 use additional indicators, such as content-based achievement tests and teacher or parental evaluations (Linguanti & Cook, 2015; Cimpian & Thompson, 2016). Regardless of what information is used in the determination, the student is designated as reclassified if the decision is affirmative.

At a recent convening about ELs that our Foundation supported, H. Gary Cook, who directs research for the WIDA Consortium and is a research scientist affiliated with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, raised the point that determining reclassification status based on English language proficiency assessment alone can work. The key is that the assessment is designed to measure both English language proficiency and the academic language needed to meaningfully engage in the content. The challenge arises, however, in understanding where to draw the line between assessing the academic language needed to engage in the content and the content itself. The goal for ELD assessments is to measure the former. If ELD assessments move too far into measuring content, there would be insufficient information about ELs’ English language proficiency, and it may become unfair to students and the schools and districts that serve them.

In sum, an important element of our present K-12 accountability system is the use of standardized tests to assess English language proficiency, academic language proficiency, and content knowledge for ELs. And while they are interconnected, these concepts are not the same. For instance, how are EL scores on content assessments to be interpreted? Are they a function of the students’ English language proficiency, content knowledge, or academic language proficiency? The answers to these questions have important implications for identifying the types of services and supports that the students would need to do better.

Toward New Research Questions

At a recent meeting of researchers, policy experts and practitioners focusing on English learners, a subgroup on accountability identified four potential areas for research under ESSA: 1) building state-level capacity, 2) evaluating the effects of the ESSA Title I spotlight on English language proficiency, 3) examining variability in ESSA implementation, and 4) investigating the impact of changes in ELP assessments and developing assessments well-suited to improving instruction for ELs. Below are examples of research questions highlighted within each area that fit our Foundation's interest in improving outcomes for English learners through a program, policy or practice.

Building State Level Capacity

What is needed to build and sustain the capacity of states to assemble useful data and use it in ways that improve outcomes for ELs? The emphasis here should be on data that will allow leaders to make better decisions and to better measure the progress of ELs. Capacity of state educational agencies can be conceptualized as shared problem solving among different EL stakeholders, such as accountability and EL policymakers, administrators, and data analysis consultants. How can different stakeholders work together to use the data effectively in order to improve EL outcomes through a program, policy or practice?

Evaluating the Effects of the ESSA Title I Spotlight on EL Proficiency

Does holding individual schools accountable for student progress toward and attainment of English language proficiency lead to better EL high school graduation rates, later academic achievement, or improved socio-emotional outcomes? If so, in what ways and under what conditions? Is there variation in what accountability means across different state and local contexts, and in what ways does this affect youth outcomes? Researchers might also investigate the potential for unintended negative consequences under ESSA, as these can occur with any policy. For instance, there might be increased segregation and tracking, fewer bilingual programs, or more teacher turnover—any or all of which could dampen EL outcomes.

Examining Variability in ESSA Implementation

What characteristics of state accountability policies and practices support improvement of EL outcomes in schools and districts? One recommendation from some scholars is that accountability policies should include more measures than only assessment, because measures of socio-emotional learning and school climate are also crucial to ELs' outcomes. Thus, researchers might undertake broader inquiries that focus on these measures as well.

Investigating the Impact of Changes in ELP Assessment

What are the impacts of changes in ELP assessments on various experiences of ELs, and do these improve their outcomes? These can include opportunities to learn content, access to rigorous language instruction, and appropriate initial classification and reclassification decisions in the context of the services provided at the local level (Cimpian & Thompson, 2016).

Developing Assessments Suited to Improving Instruction for ELs.

How can assessments be crafted to ensure that ELs receive instruction better tailored to their needs? When the federal and state governments first began to push for accountability in the 1990s, there was no organized push for teachers of ELs and content-area teachers to engage in and sustain collaborations in order to build a shared understanding of how best to serve ELs. The unfortunate result was a missed opportunity to deepen practical knowledge of how schools could ensure that ELs received better instruction tailored to their needs.

Toward the Data We Need

To arrive at the better outcomes we wish to see for ELs, we need high-quality data that allow states to know who they are serving and the progress they are making, and that also allow for the kinds of research questions we've posed here. While efforts to create these kinds of data are beyond the scope of our funding, we offer them for consideration by other agencies.

For example, expanding the definition of the EL category is critical to creating a more accurate picture of EL progress and, relatedly, to developing inquiries that can improve EL outcomes. The use of binary labels in the datasets, such as EL versus non- or never-EL, is a limitation. The binary labels that are used to disaggregate the EL category, such as long-term English learner versus non-long term English learner, are similarly limited. More useful would be labels across a continuum, each associated with specific language and academic competencies (Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski, 2017). This is because ELs are diverse in their language and academic competencies, not only in English, but also in their home language (Linguanti & Hakuta, 2012). Indeed, longitudinal data could also help capture the potential advantages of bilingualism, such as a student's ability to view a situation from another person's perspective, or enhanced academic performance. A 2016 meeting of EL research experts convened by our Foundation raised the idea that this kind of data would also provide teachers with useful information about how to instruct to the student's strengths and weaknesses.

Another limitation has been having data only on currently classified ELs, as this precludes learning from the long-term experiences and outcomes of former ELs who have been reclassified. With reclassification, these students effectively exit the category for data purposes. ESSA offers a step forward in this regard by allowing states to include former ELs who are still within four years of being reclassified in their academic assessments. Yet even this expanded window might not be enough. Linguanti and Hakuta (2012) are among many EL researchers who call for a "dynamic subgroup membership," which would involve "defining and reporting the total 'ever-EL population,' including current ELs and reclassified former ELs" (pp. 2-3).

Given the developmental nature of language acquisition, we would learn a great deal from broadening the scope of data to include the ever-EL population. As noted earlier, reclassification has not always resulted in ELs joining mainstream classrooms and flourishing on par with those peers who have never been designated as ELs. Rachel Slama (2014) found that sizable proportions of reclassified students in Massachusetts who had started kindergarten in 2002 as ELs were able to keep pace in mainstream classrooms in the early elementary school years, but encountered difficulties in middle and high school. Some ended up having to repeat a grade. This should not surprise us, since the complexity of language use increases from the earlier grades to the later ones.

Similarly, educational settings for ELs differ between elementary school and high school. Given tracking at the high-school level, ELs and their reclassified peers have substantially different academic experiences (Cimpian & Thompson, 2016). This means that "even reclassified former ELs may need opportunities and support to continue developing their academic language proficiency and content area knowledge and skills" (Linguanti & Hakuta, 2012, p. 3). At the successful end of the continuum, we also need more and better data. For example, the absence of data on reclassified middle-schoolers who later graduate from high school college-ready hampers efforts to understand the kinds of practices that might have helped them succeed (Hopkins, Thompson, Linguanti, Hakuta, & August, 2013).

Overall, with neither an ever-EL category nor a longitudinal orientation toward collecting and analyzing EL data, we risk skewing the picture of EL achievement gaps and of our success or challenges in addressing them. Depending on how we measure the EL category, for instance, at a set of discrete time points or over a time span (ever EL), our overall picture of EL progress changes. That is why more comprehensive data on ELs is critically important.

Conclusion

Strengthening practice and policy in state and local education systems will be an essential part of reducing inequality for young people in the coming years. And a fundamental piece of the effort to raise student outcomes will be building and testing approaches that states and districts can adopt to effectively meet the needs of English learners. Research that contributes to the development of stronger assessments and broadens the data about these students can potentially go a long way toward building much-needed capacity, evaluating the effects of legislation and the ways that provisions are implemented, and, ultimately, improving the academic outcomes of a diverse student body.

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