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## Preparing English language learners for academic success

Across the country, public schools are opening their doors to more and more children who speak a language other than English. Nearly every district faces the challenge of helping these children become proficient in the English language while also providing them with a high-quality education.

The task is daunting. English language learners (ELL) are not monolithic. Most have Spanish as their first language, but the rest speak any of 400 other languages (NCELA 2007). Most ELL students were born in the United States, but close to half of ELLs in grades six through twelve are foreign born (Capps et al, 2005). Like other children, they bring a range of individual experiences to school that can affect how quickly they will learn English. To complicate things further, in many places the search for effective instructional practices has been hijacked by other agendas having more to do with ideology than honest inquiry.

Fortunately, a body of research has emerged over the last ten years shedding light on what it takes to help ELLs succeed in school. The findings aren't always definitive. Even so, they provide some important lessons for shaping policies and practices that will advance both English language proficiency and academic gains of students for whom English is a second language.

In this research review, we explore answers to these questions:

- How many ELL children are in our schools and what do we know about them?
- How long does it take for a student to become "English proficient"?
- What factors influence how quickly ELL students learn English?
- What school practices support ELL achievement?
- Is it important for ELL students to have support in their first language while they learn English?
- What can school districts do to help ELL students become English proficient and successful in school?

### How many ELL children are in our schools and what do we know about them?

Although the overall number of ELL students in American schools is small, their numbers are rapidly growing. According to data from the 2000 Census:

- 3.4 million students were ELL, representing 6 percent of all school-aged children.
- At 20 percent, California educates the largest share of elementary ELL students, followed by Texas with 15 percent.
- Between 1980 and 2000, the percent of ELL students in elementary schools grew from 4.7 percent to 7.4 percent, while the ELL share of middle- and high-school enrollments increased from 3.1 percent to 5.5 percent (Capps et al, 2005).

The data also show that most children of immigrants are not classified ELL, and that not all ELLs are children of immigrants.

- 19 percent of the total school-aged population are children of immigrants compared to 6 percent who are ELL.
- Over half of all ELL students were born in the United States; the proportion of foreign born ELLs is higher among older students: 24 percent of ELLs in grades PK-5 were foreign born, and 44 percent in grades 6-12.

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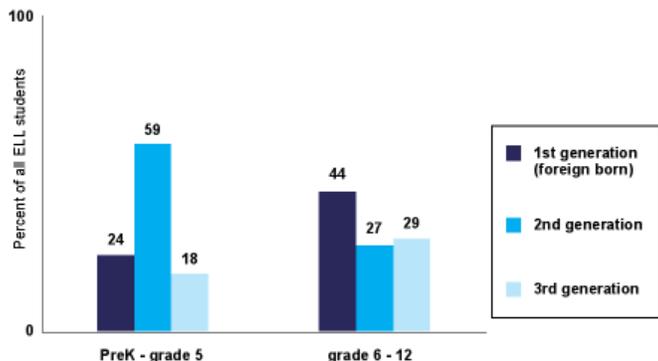
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- A sizable number of ELLs are U.S. born children of U.S. born parents: 18 percent of ELLs in grades PK–5 are third generation but their share rises to 29 percent of ELLs in grades 6–12. (See Figure 1.) According to researchers for the Urban Institute, these numbers “suggest that many children of natives who were LEP [Limited English Proficiency] when they began school remain LEP through secondary school” (Capps, et al. 2005).

**Figure 1:** Less than half of all ELL students are foreign-born. The majority were born in the U.S., and many of them are children of U.S. born parents.



SOURCE: Capps, et al., The New Demography of America's Schools, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2005. Analysis of 2000 US Census data. Analysis of U.S. Census data from the year 2000.

ELL students are most likely to have Spanish as their first language and come from low-income families. A large number have parents who did not finish high school.

- 79 percent of ELLs speak Spanish at home; the remaining 21 percent speak one of 400 other languages (NCELA 2002). (See Figure 2.)
- Two-thirds of ELLs are from low-income families<sup>1</sup> (Capps, et al. 2005).
- Almost half of ELLs (48 percent) in grades PK–5 have parents who did not finish high school (Capps et al., 2005).

**Learn about ELL students in your state:**

Urban Institute, New Demography of America's Schools, page 19, [Table 5: Limited English Proficient Students by Grade Level and State](#). (Full Report)

NCELA, Office of English Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, Survey of the States' Limited English Students and Available Educational Programs and Services, 2000-01 Summary Report, pages 24-25, [Table 3: Top Five Languages Spoken by LEP Students, by state, 2000-2001](#). (Full Report)

**Figure 2:** What languages do ELL students in the U.S. speak at home?

Over 400 languages are spoken by students who attend our public schools. The following are the top ten languages, after English.

Language	Percent of all ELL students
Spanish	79.0%
Vietnamese	2.0%
Hmong	1.6%
Chinese, Cantonese	1.0%
Korean	1.0%
Haitian Creole	0.9%
Arabic	0.9%
Russian	0.8%
Tagalog	0.7%
Navajo	0.6%

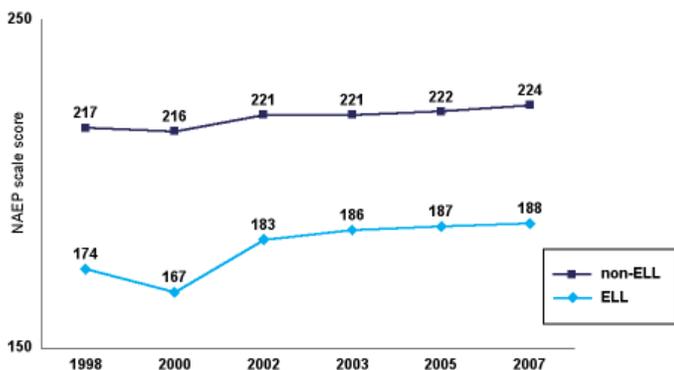
See the [most common home languages](#) after English in your state.

Source: Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students and Available Educational Programs and Services 2000-2001 Summary Report, Office of Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA), Washington, DC, October 2002

ELL students tend to lag behind their English proficient peers in reading and mathematics:

- The achievement gap between ELL (those who are able to be assessed) and non-ELL students is narrowing among fourth-graders students, but progress is slow. (See Figure 3.) The gaps are wide in both reading and math (NAEP 2007).
- Twelfth-graders classified as ELL lag behind English proficient eighth-graders in reading (NAEP 2005).

**Figure 3:** Achievement gaps are narrowing between our younger ELL students and their non-ELL classmates, although progress is slow.



SOURCE: 2007 NAEP—reading, fourth-grade. [www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

### How long does it take for a student to become “English proficient”?

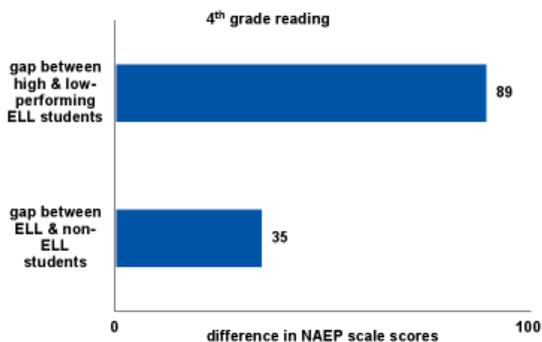
There is little consensus on what it means to be English proficient, which makes it difficult for researchers to determine how much time ELL students need to learn English. However, best current estimates find that, on average, ELL students take between four and seven years to become proficient in “academic English”—the language needed to succeed in the classroom. (See sidebar: Terms you should know.)

- **There is no common benchmark for English language proficiency.** States and districts vary greatly in the criteria used to classify students as ELL, track their progress, and reclassify them as English proficient. Across the states, at least 24 different English language proficiency tests are used, which means an ELL student in one state could easily be labeled English proficient merely by crossing into another state. This makes interstate comparisons impossible and these inconsistent definitions may lead to classification errors and negative consequences for ELLs (August and Shanahan 2006; Hakuta, Butler, and Witt 2000; Kindler 2002; Mahoney and MacSwan 2005; NCELA 2007).
- **ELL classifications vary, which means the time varies greatly for ELLs to become reclassified as English proficient.** Most estimates of the average time needed to achieve reclassification to English proficient range from three to six years, although some students are still not reclassified after ten years. (Hakuta et al. 2000; Hill 2004; MacSwan and Pray 2005; Parrish, Perez, Merickel, and Linqanti 2006).
- **Academic English proficiency is key to student achievement, particularly at the secondary level, but current measures of English proficiency may be reclassifying students too early.** Reclassification is often based on oral, rather than academic language proficiency, and does not guarantee readiness to succeed in the English-only classroom. Studies estimate that, on average, ELLs take four to seven years to become proficient in academic English—the kind of language used in textbooks and educational settings but not necessarily in social situations (Collier 1995; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Keiffer, and Rivera 2006a; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian 2006; Hakuta et al. 2000; Moore and Zainuddin 2003; Oakeley, Urrabazo, and Yang 1998).

### What factors influence how quickly ELL students learn English?

Individual ELL students have individual instructional needs. In fact, the range of skills is wider within the group of ELL students than it is between ELL students and their non-ELL classmates. (See Figure 4.) Different needs can affect how quickly they acquire English.

**Figure 4:** The range of performance is greater *within* the ELL group than it is *between* ELL and non-ELL students



High- & low-performing ELL is based on ELL scorers at the 10th & 90th percentiles  
 ELL & non-ELL gap is based on average scale score for each group  
 SOURCE: main NAEP – reading 2005, [www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

- **ELL students with formal schooling in their first language tend to acquire English proficiency faster than their peers without it.** First language proficiency is related to achievement in English. Studies suggest that language skills and conceptual knowledge in the student’s first language transfer to English (Collier 1995; García-Vázquez, Vázquez, López, and Ward 1997; Genesee et al. 2006).
- **As in other areas of education, socioeconomic status is related to ELL students’ rate of English proficiency.** ELLs’ growth rates on the California English Language Development Test were higher for students from higher SES ethnic groups such as Koreans and Russians and lower for students from lower SES ethnic groups such as Hmong and Khmer. In two large California districts, ELLs at high poverty elementary schools acquired English more slowly than other ELLs. Higher levels of parents’ education attainment were also related to higher rates of English acquisition by ELLs (Abedi and Dietel 2004; Hakuta et al. 2000; Jepsen and de Alth, 2005).

Other individual factors that are positively correlated with ELLs’ rates of English acquisition and academic achievement include literacy related skills at kindergarten entry, native-born status, learning attitudes and motivation, and the absence of learning disabilities or language impairment (August and Shanahan 2006; Masgoret and Gardner 2003; Rutherford 2006).

- **The findings on age are mixed: Most, but not all, studies show that older ELLs acquire English at higher rates than younger learners.** The effects of age may be confounded by other factors such as previous learning, level of cognitive development, age at immigration, and the increased cognitive demands of higher levels of schooling (Collier 1995; Jepsen and de Alth 2005; McLaughlin 1984, cited in Guerrero).

**What Works Clearinghouse**

In its 2007 *Practice Guide: Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades*, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, released recommendations on practices that are most likely to improve learning for ELLs. Although the research is slim, IES examined about a dozen studies identified by the federal What Works Clearinghouse as having the “rigor necessary to determine that specific instructional practices or programs produce significantly better academic outcomes with English learners” (p. 1). The guide gives five recommendations for improving reading achievement and English language development of ELLs in elementary grades:

- Conduct formative assessments with ELLs using English language measures of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. Use the data to identify ELLs who require additional support and to monitor their reading progress over time.
- Provide focused, intensive small-group interventions for ELLs at risk for reading problems. The instruction should reflect the degree of risk for the student and also include the five core reading elements (phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Instruction should be explicit and direct.
- Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. In addition, use instruction time to address the meanings of common words, phrases, and expressions not yet learned.

**What school practices support ELL achievement?**

Schools with high levels of ELL proficiency tend to have characteristics that are typically found in generally high-achieving schools, including:

- **Schoolwide focus on English language development and ELL achievement.** This includes an emphasis on data-driven instruction (Parrish et al. 2006).
- **Well-trained staff able to address the unique needs of ELL students.** Staff are supported by sustained, job embedded professional development (Francis et al. 2006a; Parrish et al. 2006; Short and Fitzsimmons 2007).
- **Consistent, ongoing language support services across all grade levels.** ELL students with consistent exposure to a coherent program do better than ELL students who are exposed to many different approaches (August and Shanahan 2006; Genesee et al. 2006).
- **Meaningful curriculum aligned with state standards and assessments.** Effective curriculum incorporates higher order thinking and is grounded in sound theory and best practices (Genesee et al. 2006). (See sidebar: What Works Clearinghouse.)

**Is it important for ELL students to have support in their first language while they learn English?**

First-language instruction seems to have long-term benefits for

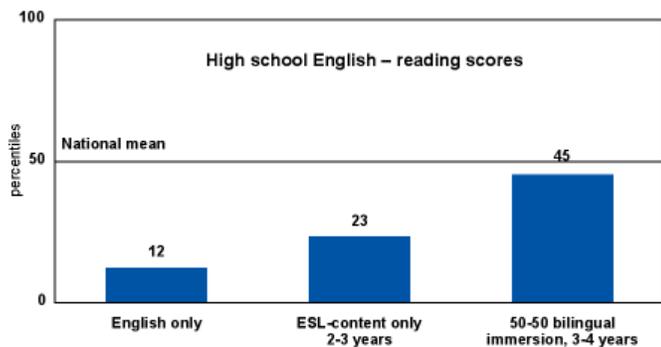
learning English. Keep in mind that other program factors are also important to ELL students' success.

- **Although some debate lingers, bilingual programs seem to be more effective.** In its massive 2006 research review, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth concluded that oral proficiency and literacy in ELLs' first language can facilitate literacy development in English, and inclusion of first-language instruction in ELL programs can have long-term benefits (August and Shanahan 2006). This conclusion is supported by five recent meta-analyses comparing bilingual and English only programs (Genesee et al. 2006; Krashen and McField 2005; Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass 2005; Slavin and Cheung 2003; Thomas and Collier 2002). (See Figure 5.)

- Ensure that the development of formal or academic English is a key instructional goal for ELLs.
- Ensure that teachers of ELLs devote approximately ninety minutes a week to instructional activities in which pairs of students at different ability levels or different English language proficiencies work together on academic tasks in a structured fashion.

The full report is available on the IES Web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee>.

**Figure 5:** ELL students with 50-50 bilingual instruction in elementary school performed best by end of high school.



SOURCE: Thomas & Collier, A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students' Long-Term Academic Achievement, Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, 2002

Other researchers have taken a neutral position on the benefits of bilingual education, pointing out the difficulty of large-scale program comparisons given limited and inconsistent statewide data about district programs (Parrish et al. 2006; Linquanti 1999).

- **Reading instruction.** ELLs can benefit from reading instruction focused on five components—phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension—if instruction is adjusted to meet ELLs' specific needs (Genesee et al. 2006). However, programs focused solely on reading at the expense of English language development in speaking, listening, and writing are insufficient to support ELLs' academic success (Callahan, 2006).
- **Oral language development.** Oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading and writing skills, but many ELL programs do not give enough attention to oral language development (August and Shanahan 2006).

## What can school districts do to help ELL students become English proficient and successful in school?

Improving academic success for ELLs is a multi-pronged challenge. Some challenges must be addressed at the federal or state level—for example, the alignment of state assessments and content standards, and sufficient inclusion of academic English in both. Many decisions about ELL education, however, are made locally. In making these decisions, school and district leaders need to consider the number, diversity, and mobility of the ELLs being served. They must also be responsive to changes in the student population. Although empirical research is not available to guide all aspects of ELL education, the research literature suggests the following:

- **Make proficiency in academic English the goal for ELLs.** Academic English is the kind of language used in textbooks and classrooms and is key to content-area learning. Increasing students' opportunity to learn academic English across content areas and grade levels and across domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) can benefit both ELLs and native English speakers.
- **Provide ample professional development to help teachers meet the educational needs of ELLs.** Teachers need to understand how to increase ELLs' opportunity to learn academic English. They also need to use a comprehensive framework for delivering academic instruction, and to differentiate instruction to promote the success of all students, including ELLs. Middle schools and secondary school teachers, in particular, need professional development and support in helping ELLs improve their reading comprehension—and their proficiency in academic English—through explicit instruction in literacy strategies, vocabulary, and background knowledge.
- **When possible, include some first-language instruction when teaching ELLs.** Research suggests that support in the child's first language can have long-range benefits for ELL students. Also helpful—if enhanced

and adjusted to meet ELLs' learning needs—is reading instruction focused on the five components of reading, as identified by the National Reading Panel (phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension). Replacing English language development with a reading intervention, however, can slow ELLs' academic achievement.

- **Make ELL achievement a schoolwide focus.** Many of the attributes of effective schools can also support ELL achievement. These include a schoolwide commitment to ELL achievement, consistent language support services of adequate duration across all grade levels, sufficient educator capacity, and a match between resources and the community served (National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth).
- **Base assessment policies and ELL classification decisions on measures of students' proficiency in academic English.** However, keep in mind that this may be easier said than done. According to many researchers, valid and reliable measures of academic language proficiency still need to be developed.
- **Continue to monitor ELLs' progress even after they have been reclassified as English proficient.** The methods currently used to classify and place ELLs may result in some students' being pulled out of English language support programs too soon. To help these students get back on track, schools should monitor the academic progress of ELLs who exit language support programs and provide extra help when needed.

Helping individual ELLs master academic language is a complex, long-term process, not an event or a program with a clear end date. A statement from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics (1992) is worth repeating: "Research on second language learning has shown that many misconceptions exist about how children learn languages. Teachers need to be aware of these misconceptions and realize that quick and easy solutions are not appropriate for complex problems. Second language learning by school-aged children takes longer, is harder, and involves more effort than many teachers realize" (p. 2). Districts can support both teachers and students in this endeavor by making sure teachers are well prepared, adopting programs that provide sustained and coherent instruction across grade levels, and fostering continuous school improvement with a focus on student learning.

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1 Capps et al define low-income as family income below 185 percent of federal poverty level.

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*This summary is based on a review conducted for the Center for Public Education by researchers at Edvantia, an education research and development not-for-profit corporation founded in 1966. For more information, see Research Review: What research says about preparing English language learners for academic success.*

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