COMMENTARY

Access for English Learners—Part 2

Revising Identification and Reclassification Policies

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This blog post is part 2 of 3. For part one click here; for part three click here.

In framing the legal responsibility of districts to provide language access and protect the rights of English Learners to an equal educational opportunity, the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision stated: Any system employed to deal with the special language skills needs of national origin minority group children must be designated to meet such language skills needs as soon as possible and must not operate as an educational dead-end or permanent track. Given the negative educational consequences of the misidentification and long-term status of English Learners (EL) highlighted at two research conferences I recently attended, it appears that current policies are not consistent with the *Lau v. Nichols* decision and too many ELs are ending up in dead-end academic tracks.

I previously reviewed recent findings that question the validity and reliability of identification practices of English Learners (EL), and the low reclassification rates of students to Fluent English Proficient (FEP). Now I will discuss recent findings regarding the positive benefits of early reclassification and the negative consequences of long-term EL

CONCERNS ABOUT LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNERS

In a recent report, Laurie Olsen noted that the majority (59%) of secondary school English Learners are "Long Term English Learners," defined as students enrolled in U.S. schools for more than six years without reaching sufficient English proficiency to be reclassified. The report highlights that in one out of three California districts, more than 75% of ELs are Long Term.

In a 2009 study, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) found that less than 5% of ELs in LAUSD were reclassified before 4th grade, 28.6% in 5th grade, 13.4% in 6th grade, 7.2% in 7th grade, and 8.1% in the 8th grade. Nearly 30% of ELs had not been reclassified by the end of the 8th grade. Most of the students who never reached reclassification (75.9%) had been considered English Learners since at least the first grade, with only 5.5% entering the United States after the start of their educational career. These findings are consistent with previous findings by Yang Sao Xiong and Min Zhou who reported that in 2004–2005, 45% of California's ELs in grades 6 through 8 scored below "Early Advanced" on the CELDT, and thus did not meet criteria for reclassification.

Several factors seem to contribute to becoming a Long-Term English Learner: receiving no language development program at all; curricula and materials not designed to meet EL needs; enrollment in weak or poorly implemented EL programs; social segregation and linguistic isolation; and cycles of transnational moves. As a result, by the time Long-Term EL's arrive in secondary schools, they struggle academically. They have high functioning social language, very weak academic language, and significant deficits in reading and writing skills. Long-Term EL's also have significant gaps in academic background knowledge and many

become academically disengaged. The majority of Long-Term EL's want to go to college, but are unaware that their academic skills and courses are not preparing them to reach that goal.

In California, English Learners are more likely to attend school in linguistically isolated communities. Within those schools, they are clustered primarily with other ELs, resulting in few opportunities to interact with native English speakers. Research on second language development cites both interaction with native English speakers as a key component in providing the necessary opportunities to use English in authentic situations, and exposure to good English models. Due to linguistic segregation, ELs often learn English with and from other ELs, and they depend upon the teacher to be the sole English model. Thus, these conditions make it so that once a student is identified as EL, they are enrolled in ELD courses and will stay there for a long time.

Recent findings suggest that reclassification criteria are too strict and keep students in ELD for too long.CRESST recently reported that EL students tend to make a smooth transition upon their reclassification and keep pace in mainstream classrooms. Results also suggest that protracted EL status due to too stringent reclassification criteria may be detrimental to ELs' learning in mainstream classrooms. More specifically, the authors note that students who were reclassified with the highest English Language Proficiency (ELP) level (i.e., Level 5) did not show any significant difference from other EL students who were reclassified at a lower ELP level, in terms of subsequent learning rates in reading. Reclassified ELs did show significantly slower learning rates in math suggesting that in subjects in which a sequence of learning is especially important and language is less required, prolonged EL status may be detrimental to subsequent learning in mainstream classrooms. TRPI's 2009 study also found that overall, reclassified students' performance was similar to English-only students or those initially classified as English proficient in three academic outcomes: AP course-taking, dropout rates, and CAHSEE passing rates. Students who were not reclassified by the end of middle school performed substantially worse.

These findings suggest that students reclassified at any point during elementary school or middle school are much more likely to succeed academically when compared with those not reclassified. Among this group of students, more than two-thirds were native-born students. Reclassification is a key milestone for ELs. Consequently, faulty decisions about their readiness may seriously hamper future learning. EL status in secondary schools means less access to the classes required for high school graduation and admission to post-secondary education.

The cumulative effects of diminished access to academic coursework over time can be significant, most likely preventing ELs from entering postsecondary education. Particularly because beginning in 6th grade, the curriculum starts to build up knowledge for core math classes that are critical to high school graduation and entrance to post-secondary education in later years. 5th grade EL students who are academically ready for mainstream classrooms but are retained as ELs after 6th grade may miss the opportunity to take more rigorous math classes that build knowledge for subsequent years. These students may not be able to learn as rapidly as students who are reclassified earlier and receive the opportunity to be in a class that corresponds to their current math ability.

Protracted EL status essentially keeps students in slower academic tracks with less challenging curriculum. The imprecise selection and placement of students into differentiated curriculum and the self-fulfilling prophecies that result from such placement can, independently, determine students' immediate opportunities to learn. It affects their motivations and long-term educational trajectories, such as access to higher education. Lack of reclassification can cause unequal access to positive role models and fully credentialed teachers which results in differential educational and occupational outcomes. Xiong and Zhou argue that the reclassification standards established for the CELDT are so strict that even English Only students at all grade levels would fail to pass or show "English proficiency."

I concur that while establishing academic standards is important, it is problematic to impose a particular set of standards to language minorities at a level that may not be achieved by some English Only students, an issue that current policies ignore. The tension between assuring that students have sufficient ELP to be successful in mainstream classrooms and avoiding the potential negative consequences of protracted EL status, creates an essential dilemma in determining the optimal time for EL

reclassification. Lacking firm evidence to resolve the dilemma, states and local schools show variation in their reclassification criteria and procedures, resulting in inconsistencies. The validity of existing criteria and procedures lack an empirical base, and as a result, reclassification policies and practices are formulated and implemented with little knowledge of the factors that may influence their success.

As a developmental psychologist, I am also greatly concerned about the negative impact of misclassification and long-term ELD status on student achievement motivation and academic self-efficacy.

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