COMMENTARY

Reclassification Patterns Among Latino English Learner Students in Bilingual, Dual Immersion, and English Immersion Classrooms

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In California, English learner (EL) students are assessed every year in both English language proficiency and in English language arts (ELA) achievement. Once EL students have met criteria on both these measures, they are eligible to be "reclassified" from EL status to "reclassified fluent English proficient" (RFEP) status. Reclassification is a key educational milestone for students learning English. Legally and practically, reclassification results in a change in the educational services student receive. Prior to reclassification, EL students are provided specialized services to meet their dual needs of language and content. Once reclassified, students lose access to these specialized services but gain access to mainstream classes including the full breadth of courses, teachers, and peers. Many accountability mechanisms, educational services, and policies are organized to promote and incentivize rapid and universal English learner reclassification.

Using 12 years of data from a large urban school district in California, this study examines Latino English learner students' progress toward reclassification and the linguistic and academic gatekeepers to reclassification. In particular, it examines how students' progress toward reclassification differs across linguistic instructional environments. There are currently four main instructional programs used in the U.S. for English learners, all of which are present in the school district examined. *English immersion* offers instruction in an all English environment while *transitional bilingual*, *maintenance bilingual*, and *dual immersion* programs all offer instruction in both English and students' home language. The three types of bilingual programs vary in program length, student composition, and the proportion of instruction that is in students' home language.

The median amount of time it takes a Latino EL student to be reclassified is eight years. Thus, well over half of Latino EL students will eventually fall into California's "long term English learner" category (those who have been ELs for 6 or more years). In fact, we estimate that nearly a quarter of Latino EL students will never be reclassified. But these averages mask important differences between different linguistic instructional programs. We find that Latino EL students enrolled in the three bilingual programs are reclassified at a slower pace in elementary school than those in the English immersion program, but nonetheless have higher overall reclassification, English proficiency, and academic proficiency rates by the end of high school. This means that while it typically takes students in bilingual programs longer to be reclassified more of them eventually become proficient in English and are reclassified than comparable students in the all-English program.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. First, they underscore the importance of school districts' examining the efficacy of two-language instruction over multiple years. Many important educational outcomes—both linguistic and academic—may show very different patterns in the short- versus the long-term. Second, rather than one set of goals for all

instructional models, it may make sense to have differentiated benchmarks based on language of instruction and theories of development. For example, goals for English immersion programs might be stable annual growth in English proficiency and academic outcomes across grades while goals for bilingual programs would have slower English proficiency growth levels in early grades and more rapid acceleration in later grades.

Most importantly, the findings of this study suggest that regardless of the language of instruction, EL programs should be designed to ensure that EL students have full access to rigorous content and interaction with English-speaking peers. In practice this would mean ensuring that English language development (ELD) classes do not limit enrollment in other classes, that teachers are properly prepared to teach ELs within mainstream classes, that English language instruction is embedded in content area classes, that ELs can and do enroll in any and all classes, and that less emphasis is placed on short-term EL reclassification rates.

The full study is in Umansky, Ilana and Sean Reardon, "Reclassification Patterns Among Latino English Learner Students in Bilingual, Dual Immersion, and English Immersion Classrooms" American Educational Research Journal, October 2014 vol. 51, no. 5, 879-912.

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