

COMMENTARY

Establishing Equitable Policies for English Learners

AUTHOR

[Joseph Cimpian](#) | New York University

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Current and former “[English learners](#)” (ELs) make up about 40 percent of California’s public-school student population. Establishing and implementing equitable policies and programs that simultaneously facilitate English proficiency and academic excellence for this group is of the utmost importance for the future wellbeing of California. In [this study](#), my coauthors [Karen D. Thompson](#) from Oregon State University, [Ilana Umansky](#) at University of Oregon, and I focus on what robust research suggests about effective policies concerning (1) [EL reclassification](#), (2) use of native language, (3) access to the core curriculum, and (4) assessment and accountability. Here, I provide a brief overview of our policy conclusions.

Recent work on reclassification from EL to [fluent English proficient](#) (FEP)—that is, exiting EL status—has focused on two aspects: (1) the time necessary to reach FEP status and (2) determining appropriate criteria for reclassification. New analyses from two large urban school districts in California provide converging evidence that reclassification takes about 6 to 6.5 years on average. Of course, some students reach this milestone sooner, but others never reach it. Interestingly, although students in English immersion classrooms reach this milestone a little sooner than those in bilingual-education classrooms, students in bilingual classrooms are reclassified at higher rates. This finding suggests that, in the long run, bilingual education may be more beneficial as a policy for helping more students acquire English and become reclassified.

For exiting EL status, the criteria should be closely tied to the construct of English proficiency, and there should be careful coordination between EL and FEP services. On the first point, in California, this would mean emphasizing the [California English Language Development Test](#) results over the results of academic content assessments, such as English language arts standardized tests and grades. On the point of careful coordination, a recent wave of research using sophisticated “regression discontinuity designs” makes clear the policy importance in aligning appropriate reclassification criteria with linguistically and developmentally appropriate instruction for students before and after reclassification. Put another way, if policymakers and educators create systems that misalign the criteria and instruction, negative consequences ensue for both achievement and longer-term outcomes like graduation.

To help EL students reach reclassified status—and more generally, thrive academically—we consider two primary factors: (1) the extent to which instruction is delivered in the student’s native language and (2) the access students have to the core academic curriculum. As mentioned above, bilingual education programs have recently been found to be particularly beneficial for helping students acquire English and succeed academically. Thus, the evidence suggests a reconsideration of [Proposition 227](#), which substantially reduced bilingual-education program offerings across the state. We also found that ELs are often educated in classes that segregate them from non-EL students and limit their access to the core academic curriculum in subjects like English language

arts and mathematics.

Some promising research came out on “dual immersion” programs, which enroll both ELs and non-ELs and teach partly in English and partly in the partner language (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin). Two new studies—one of them experimental—suggest that EL and non-EL students in dual immersion programs have higher long-term achievement outcomes in core subjects. Thus, dual immersion programs may serve multiple purposes: helping ELs acquire English, valuing multilingualism for both ELs and non-ELs, and improving academic content-area achievement. Expanding dual immersion programs may thus be of interest to policymakers in California.

Finally, it is important to accurately and fairly measure the progress of ELs. Research suggests that assessments intended for non-EL populations can be unfairly biased when given to EL populations. To remedy this bias, accommodations can be made during the assessment process. Translating the English-version test into the native language of ELs has been found to be particularly effective at reducing testing bias. However, not all ELs necessarily require tests translations, and thus other accommodations may be better suited to some students—thus, a “one size fits all” accommodation policy is undesirable. As a matter of policy, making different accommodations available and providing appropriate accommodations for specific students is likely to yield fair and accurate assessments for ELs. Ensuring such fairness is not only important to the students, but also to teachers and schools under many accountability policies.

When assessing student progress, it is also important to keep in mind that the category of “EL” changes over time as students become reclassified; thus, a student who makes a lot of progress one year may not be considered an EL the next, leading us to underestimate the success of ELs as a group. Thus, policymakers may also want to consider the performance of a stable category, such as “ever EL,” which would include current ELs and former ELs. Such accountability policies would more accurately measure the total progress of students who were ever considered ELs. The new federal [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) allows state policymakers to move closer to this goal for federal accountability, but it doesn’t fully get there. Nevertheless, California could consider adding the “ever EL” category to the subgroups already considered for accountability.

Clearly, as with any students, ensuring the academic success of ELs requires many different and multi-pronged services and policies. This commentary gives a short overview of the policy findings in our longer paper, which itself contains some simple bullet-point lists and key takeaways for educators and policymakers.

*The [full study](#) is in Joseph P. Robinson-Cimpian, Karen D. Thompson, and Ilana M. Umansky, “Research and Policy Considerations for English Learner Equity,” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* March 2016 vol. 3 no. 1 129-137*

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Stanford Graduate School of Education

520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444

Stanford, CA 94305

Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

