



REL research digest

WEST

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Taking a Closer Look at English Learner Subgroups Whose Achievement Stalls Out

To figure out better ways to serve their English language learner (ELL) students, the state departments of education in the West Region states of Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, who are members of the English Learner Alliance, asked REL West to help them put together a more detailed picture of two particular groups of K–12 ELL students who seem to stall out in their progress toward English language proficiency and/or academic achievement. To learn more about this study, the *REL West Research Digest* spoke with Eric Haas, a Senior Research Associate at WestEd, who leads REL West staff providing the Alliance technical assistance and data analysis.

Which subgroups of English learners did the study focus on?

First of all, it's important to note that there is a body of research documenting student characteristics associated with academic struggles among K–12 students generally, including ELL students. These include, for example, poverty and eligibility for special education services. But English learner students have a lot more on their plates at school than native English speakers, at least initially, because they have to learn English and academic content at the same time. Often, especially if they are recent immigrants, they also have to learn about and adapt to the culture of U.S. schools.

So the Alliance wanted to get a finer grained look at a couple of particular groups of ELL students the research hasn't focused on. The first group doesn't pass their state's English language proficiency (ELP) test within the expected time frame. For study purposes,

we labeled this group "long-term English language learner" (LTEL) students. Educators are particularly concerned about this group because passing the state ELP test is often considered the threshold for acquiring academic knowledge and skills taught in English.

The second group of students had already passed the ELP test, achieving "reclassified fluent English proficient" (RFEP) status, but hadn't passed the state English language arts (ELA) test, which is the next step toward meeting minimum achievement standards. So, although ELP test scores indicate they are ready to learn in a mainstream, English-only classroom, their standardized ELA test scores don't support that. We call this group "*struggling* RFEP students." Together, the LTEL and struggling RFEP students currently represent between 23 and 46 percent of English learners in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, depending on the state.

REL West Research Digest keeps educators and others abreast of the research, data analysis, and technical assistance carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), including joint efforts with eight state and regional research alliances of education stakeholders in the West Region states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, the twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events in the West Region, or publications developed by other researchers.

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What did the data analysis reveal about these English learner subgroups that might guide early identification and intervention?

This study aimed to address a gap in the research literature by providing descriptions of the initial characteristics of ELL students who become either long-term ELL students or struggling RFEP students, and any differences in the initial characteristics between these groups and their ELL counterparts who pass the English proficiency and/or the state English language arts or reading content test(s). We looked at the data by state and by three grade-level cohorts. Here are a few highlights of overall findings.

Among long-term ELL students, compared to reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP) students, there were lower percentages of students who had higher initial English language proficiency (ELP) levels at the beginning of the study period. Similar patterns were found for struggling RFEP students compared to RFEP students who had passed the state ELA/reading content test at least once in the six years of data studied.

First, the majority of ELL students across all three states and cohorts were reclassified as fluent English proficient during the 2006/07 to 2011/12 period for which data were analyzed. State figures ranged from 50 to more than 90 percent of students classified as RFEP among the grade-level cohorts we examined. We also found, in general, that there were greater percentages of long-term ELL students and struggling RFEP students among the older students than among younger students, which suggests that we may need either greater emphasis or new approaches to enable these students to improve achievement.

Second, overall, but with a few exceptions, long-term ELL students included a higher percentage of students eligible for an individualized education program (IEP) than was the case among RFEP students. This suggests

that there has to be a better understanding of how learning disabilities interact with English language learning, and a more coordinated approach toward serving students who deal with both. We plan to follow up these findings with analyses of the progress patterns of students within these characteristic groups, such as the number of years it takes for ELL students eligible for an IEP to meet interim achievement benchmarks and at which achievement level they generally stop progressing.

And third, among long-term ELL students, compared to RFEP students, there were lower percentages of students who had higher initial English language proficiency (ELP) levels at the beginning of the study period. Similar patterns were found for struggling RFEP students compared to RFEP students who had passed the state ELA/reading content test at least once in the six years of data that were studied. At the same time, between 50 and 91 percent of the long-term ELL students in some of the grade-level cohorts started the study period at one of the two highest ELP levels below reclassifying as proficient.

This means that most of the long-term ELL students in some grade-level cohorts stalled in their progress because they did not make the final two steps to reclassification during the last five years of the study period. Further research should examine what characterizes this subgroup of long-term ELL students, why they did not complete the last two steps to reclassification, and what programs and practices might be effective in improving their outcomes.

What are some follow-up research questions the Alliance would like to investigate?

The English Learner Alliance would like to use this data analysis project as an initial model for similar follow-up projects, including longitudinal analyses of ELL student progress in English language proficiency (ELP) tests and academic subject matter tests based on additional student characteristics, such as grade level of entry and years as an ELL student, and examine how soon and consistently ELL students pass their content tests. We would also like to compare ELL student progress to native English speakers with similar student characteristics.

For further information about this study or about the work of the English Learner Alliance, contact Eric Haas at ehass@wested.org or 510.302.4288.

Bridge Events on CCSS Focus on English Learners and Their Teachers

Leadership teams from California districts and county offices of education gathered on February 25 in Irvine and February 26 in Oakland for a one-day event focused on the rapidly changing landscape for implementation of the Common Core State Standards with English language learner (ELL) students.

With a focus on promoting the success of English learners, the event addressed issues related to building district capacity to implement plans and practices that support thoughtful implementation of CCSS instruction and assessment.

The keynote address for both events, *Changing Times, Changing Standards, Changing Teacher Expertise*, was delivered by Aida Walqui, Director of the Teacher Professional Development Program at WestEd and a national expert on issues related to ELL students and the Common Core State Standards.

Co-sponsored by REL West at WestEd, California Collaborative on District Reform at AIR, and California Education Partners, each event featured multiple opportunities to learn from experts and each other, access resources and tools that support teachers and ELL students, and plan next steps. General and breakout session topics included ELD online professional learning modules, the California ELA/ELD curriculum framework, formative assessment, CCSS and STEM, and district planning.

Keynote speaker video and session materials will be posted on the REL West website.

See more at: <http://relwest.wested.org/events/223>

Questions about this event? Please contact Meg Livingston Asensio, mlivingst@wested.org, 415.615.3196.

Hear Experts' Perspectives on CCSS Instruction and Assessment

Recorded at a two-day conference in summer of 2013, these video presentations illuminate key aspects of implementing the Common Core State Standards.

Preparing for Assessments in a Common Core World

Speaker: Stanley Rabinowitz, Director of the Assessment and Standards Development Services, WestEd

Rabinowitz is Director of the national Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation and of the Project Management Partner work for the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium. He has consulted extensively on standards, assessment, and school/educator accountability issues with policymakers and practitioners at national, regional, and state levels. (60 minutes)

Using Formative Assessment to Support Instructional Shifts in the CCSS

Speaker: Margaret Heritage, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, UCLA

This session, designed especially for, and limited to, school-level instructional coaches and teachers, addressed ways that formative assessment can assist teachers and students to meet the CCSS, how teachers should be teaching differently to meet the needs of new assessments and standards, and how instructional leaders can best support teachers and students in these shifts. (60 minutes)

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<http://relwest.wested.org>

REL and IES Publications on ELL Student Teaching and Learning

REL West

Effects of Making Sense of Science Professional Development on the Achievement of Middle School Students, Including English Language Learners

This study examined whether WestEd's Understanding Science Program improved teachers' content knowledge, instructional strategies, and confidence in teaching a unit on force and motion and, in turn, increased eighth-grade students' knowledge and performance on a state achievement test. (March 2012)

REL Mid-Atlantic

A Descriptive Analysis of Enrollment and Achievement Among English Language Learner Students in Delaware

This report describes enrollment and achievement trends between 2002/03 and 2008/09 among ELL students in Delaware public schools. (April 2012)

A Descriptive Analysis of Enrollment and Achievement Among English Language Learner Students in New Jersey

This report describes enrollment and achievement trends of LEP students in New Jersey public schools

between 2002/03 and 2008/09. It documents achievement gaps between LEP and general education students in language arts literacy and math, as measured by statewide assessments. (April 2012)

REL Central

Differential Effects of English Language Learner Training and Materials—On Our Way to English (OWE) and Responsive Instruction for Success (RISE)

The study investigated the impact on student achievement of using ELL-specific materials in the classroom, in combination with teacher professional development aligned with those materials. (April 2012)

What Works Clearinghouse

Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School

Geared toward teachers, administrators, and other educators, this IES Practice Guide provides four recommendations that address what works for English learners during reading and content area instruction. (April 2014)

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Functioning much like a technical reference library, it answers education-related questions by providing referrals to IES research projects, publications, and reports; references for and bibliographies of existing education research; referrals to federally funded education organizations and websites; and regionally specific educational information. To Ask A REL, go to <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/askarel> and click on your state.

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