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English Learners and ESL Programs in the Community College: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Demographic and postsecondary enrollment data suggest that the proportion of community college students who need support to access curricula in English is large and will continue to grow in the coming years. Yet there is limited research on the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of these English learners (ELs), and most of the studies that are available focus exclusively on the subset of ELs who enroll in ESL courses. Informed by relevant research literature, this paper examines factors within the community college context that affect the experiences and academic outcomes of the EL population broadly, and, given that they can be more easily identified and have been the subject of much more study, students who enroll in ESL courses in particular. We describe ELs and their academic needs and strengths, and we provide a brief discussion of the national and state policy landscape regarding EL students. We then provide perspectives from the research literature on ESL assessment and placement, instructional delivery, and student identity. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and future research.

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1. Introduction

A growing proportion of community college students across the nation are English learners (ELs), or students who consider a language other than English their dominant language and who need support to access standard curricula in English.¹ This is particularly the case in some areas and regions. In California, at least one fourth of community college students are ELs and immigrants (Llosa & Bunch, 2011), and half of all students at City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges are not native English speakers (City University of New York, 2016). Despite the substantial size of the EL student population, there is limited research on the experiences and outcomes of ELs at community colleges and other higher education institutions. Moreover, most of the studies that are available focus exclusively on the subset of ELs who enroll in ESL courses. These limitations are at least in part due to challenges in accurately identifying EL students. While the K-12 system has protocols in place for classifying ELs and measuring their outcomes, state and federal policies do not mandate that postsecondary institutions identify or monitor the progress of ELs. Postsecondary institutions typically collect demographic data about students but do not systematically track each student's language proficiency (Kanno & Harklau, 2012).

Findings from available studies suggest that students who enroll in ESL courses in community colleges often have weaker postsecondary outcomes than those who do not. For example, examination of data from one community college system suggests that students who enroll in ESL courses tend to accrue fewer college credits than language minority students who enroll in developmental English courses (Hodara, 2015), and many ESL students never end up enrolling in introductory college-level math and English college courses (Razfar & Simon, 2011).

By reviewing relevant literature, this paper examines factors within the community college context that affect the experiences and academic outcomes of the EL population broadly, and, given that they can be more easily identified and have been the subject of much more study, students who enroll in ESL courses in particular. We begin

¹ Scholars use various labels to refer to this and similarly defined populations (Nuñez et al., 2016). We elaborate on our choice to use this and other terms in Section 3.

by providing information on enrollment trends and by describing ELs, ESL courses, and terminology. We then explain the method we used to gather and examine the literature, and we provide a brief overview of the federal and state policy landscape relevant to the education of ELs. Next, we present perspectives from the research literature organized into three categories: ESL and developmental English assessment and placement, ESL instructional delivery, and EL student identity. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

2. Enrollment Trends

Enrollment trends in primary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions suggest that the EL student population is getting larger. In 1992, approximately 5 percent of students in primary or secondary schools nationwide spoke a language other than English at home and spoke English with difficulty (Planty et al., 2009) ; by 2015, 9.5 percent were identified as ELs, and the proportion of ELs enrolled in K-12 public schools exceeded 10 percent in seven states and the District of Columbia (McFarland et al., 2018). National data sources do not offer estimates of the number of ELs attending two-year and four-year colleges (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). ELs' access to four-year colleges may be inhibited by a number of institutional- and individual-level factors, including uneven access to college preparatory or other advanced courses and limited knowledge of the college application process, which make them more inclined to attend community colleges (Kanno, 2018). While there is little direct data on the numbers of ELs enrolled at colleges, national and system-level information on the postsecondary enrollment of students from particular ethnic groups offers some insight.

National postsecondary enrollment rates for Hispanic students have grown dramatically in recent years,² and rates for Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students are projected to increase by 26 percent and 12 percent, respectively, from 2015 to 2026. In comparison, postsecondary enrollment among White students is projected to increase by only 1 percent over the same period (Hussar & Bailey, 2018). Many of these new

² Based on the Current Population Survey, the postsecondary enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-old Hispanic students in colleges grew from 10 percent in 2010 to 39 percent in 2016 (McFarland et al., 2018).

enrollments will occur in the public two-year college sector. Community colleges enroll a large proportion of Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander students (Campbell & Westcott, 2019; Ma & Baum, 2016). Notably, 56 percent of all Hispanic undergraduates attend community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016).

These data suggest that, especially in regions with large numbers of immigrant residents, a significant proportion of students who enroll in community colleges may need support to access curricula in English. In California, ELs and immigrants together composed an estimated 25 percent of the approximately 2.5 million students attending community colleges in 2011 (Llosa & Bunch, 2011). An estimated 50 percent of the 99,045 students enrolled in the City University of New York's community colleges in fall 2015 were not native English speakers (City University of New York, 2016).

3. English Learners

Higher education institutions and scholars who study ELs use various terms to refer to them and similarly defined populations. These terms differ in what they highlight or signal about the students: Some emphasize the linguistic skills that students have or are pursuing (and are thus sometimes described as reflecting an “asset” perspective), while others focus on the linguistic limitations of students (and are sometimes described as reflecting a “deficit” perspective) (Nuñez et al., 2016). References to these student populations often include characteristics other than fluency in English, such as immigration status, race and ethnicity, and educational background (Bergey et al., 2018). Given the lack of consistent terminology and the potential for vocabulary to impart value-laden judgments, it is important to establish a working definition of ELs and acknowledge or explain how other characteristics may be associated with this group of students.

3.1 Definitions

Language minority, a very broad and commonly used category, refers to all students who consider a language other than English their primary language or the language that they speak at home. Not all language minority students, however, need

support to access curricula in English. Many are fluent in academic English, and they pursue similar postsecondary pathways and achieve comparable academic outcomes as native English speakers (Mavrogordato & White, 2017; Hodara, 2012; Nuñez et al., 2016).

English learner refers to the subset of language minority students who need support to access curricula in English. For ELs in college, we do not restrict this term to students who have been formally identified by K-12 institutions as non-native learners of English. This broad definition encompasses ELs in college who may not have experienced K-12 schooling in the United States or whose English language skills may not have been formally assessed prior to college.

Generation 1.5 refers to students who enter college having completed at least some formal schooling in the United States and in English. They may or may not need support in accessing curricula in English.

Lastly, *ESL student* is a common label used to refer to the subset of ELs who pursue learning English or strengthening their English skills by taking one or more ESL courses in college (Nuñez et al., 2016).

3.2 Characteristics

The personal and academic backgrounds of ELs in community colleges and elsewhere vary considerably. The EL college student population includes immigrants who permanently reside in the United States, some of whom have attended K-12 schools in the United States and received formal instruction in English. Others, meanwhile, immigrated at an older age and may or may not have received English instruction in primary or secondary school in their home countries. ELs in college also include international students who are studying in the United States on a temporary basis (Llosa & Bunch, 2011). Additionally, ELs include children of immigrants who are born and educated in the United States but consider English a second language and need support to access curricula in English (Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Okhremtchouk, 2014).

ELs also represent a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. For example, a large proportion of ELs identify as Latino (Bunch & Panayotova, 2008; Laden, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2005; Nuñez & Bowers, 2011). Latino students are individuals “of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or

origin regardless of race” (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997). Students of African or Asian descent are quite diverse as well. It is important to acknowledge that terms and labels that collapses multiple heritages (e.g., Latino, African, Asian) and native languages—including those terms we introduced above—may mask important differences in the cultural and educational backgrounds of ELs from different places of origin (Garcia & Bayer, 2005).

The EL population is also made up of students with varying degrees of academic preparation in English. International and immigrant students may or may not have received formal instruction in English in their countries of origin and therefore have varying English vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and other language development needs (Jiang & Kuehn, 2001). The quality of formal instruction—whether in English or a native language—can be indicative of general academic preparation and has implications for how English language skills develop (Jiang & Kuehn, 2001; Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Generation 1.5 students are typically comfortable with conversational English and, depending on their educational background, may face many of the same challenges that academically underprepared monolingual English speakers face. For example, while they might write and speak English, college standards may not deem Generation 1.5 students’ written and spoken English as grammatically correct for college writing or classroom discussions (Bunch & Panayotova, 2008).

Research suggests that classification as an EL and the form of English language learning support students receive in K-12 settings are consequential for EL students’ longer-term academic outcomes. Umansky (2016) found that students classified as ELs experience lower academic outcomes compared to their peers. Using a quasi-experimental regression discontinuity design, the study tracked kindergarten students in an urban school district in California who scored just above and just below the cut score for classification as English proficient and could thus be considered very similar; the latter were classified and educated as ELs. Umansky found that, overall, these students scored statistically significantly lower on math and English California standardized tests from grades 2 through 10 than the students who scored just above the cut score on the English proficiency exam and did not receive interventions designed for ELs. The

observed effect varied by the type of instructional program offered for English learners³; the significant negative effect was primarily driven by enrollment in English immersion courses. Several studies also suggest that students classified as ELs in high school exit school with statistically significantly lower academic outcomes (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2010; Callahan, 2005; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Cimpian, Thompson, & Makowski, 2017). For ELs who choose to pursue postsecondary education and continue to have English language learning needs, one common approach taken by colleges is to provide ESL courses.

4. ESL Courses and Enrollees

ESL courses are “reading and writing courses specifically designed for language minority students in need of English language support” (Hodara, 2012, p. 6). They offer English reading, writing, and oral communication instruction tailored to the needs of students who are not native English speakers (Hodara, 2012; Crandall & Sheppard, 2004). Since there are no prescribed and standardized federal policies to support or identify students in community colleges from language minority backgrounds (Llosa & Bunch, 2011), college systems and institutions determine their own English language support assessment, placement, and enrollment procedures. Assessment instruments used to identify and place ELs vary widely and include the ACCUPLACER ESL and other ESL-specific tests (Bunch et al., 2011; Barr, Rasor, & Grill, 2002). Community colleges may direct ELs to different English language learning supports, including ESL courses and developmental English courses, based on students’ test results or other criteria, such as their previous education or educational goals.

Multiple ESL course options are frequently available at community colleges. These courses may be either noncredit⁴ and free or for-credit and tuition-based.

³ The school district in this study offered English immersion courses (courses that provide instruction exclusively in English at a level targeted for ELs) and three forms of two-language courses (courses that provide at least some instruction in the students’ native language). A majority of courses were offered using the English immersion model (Umansky, 2016).

⁴ Noncredit courses do not count toward a degree and are typically taken by students who want to acquire knowledge but are not pursuing a credential.

Noncredit ESL courses are typically designed to serve students just starting to learn English and are often offered through adult education institutions within a community college district (Blumenthal, 2002; Rodriguez, Bohn, Hill, & Brooks, 2019). Course pathways to for-credit, college-level introductory English courses are often designed such that there are several levels between beginner noncredit ESL and transfer-level English (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Credit ESL courses may be housed in developmental education departments, English departments, foreign language departments, or separate ESL departments. Not all credits earned for ESL courses, however, are applicable toward a degree or are transferrable. In California, for example, of the ESL courses that feed into transfer-level English, 89 percent are offered for credit; however, credits accrued for less than a quarter of these courses count toward a degree or may be transferred to a four-year institution (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

ESL courses are a common approach for providing English language support, but as previously noted, not all ELs enroll in ESL (Callahan & Humphries, 2016). And, again as previously mentioned, precise estimates of the size of the EL population in higher education elude us because, unlike in the K-12 sector, there is no standardized or mandated classification system used by states or colleges. However, it appears that only a minority of ELs in community colleges enroll in ESL courses (Lazear, 1999).⁵ Instead, most ELs choose from a variety of academic, career and technical, and noncredit programs that offer varying levels of English language learning and other academic supports. The college experiences and outcomes enabled through these programs vary; the programs made available are a product of the policies, practices, and cultures of the institutions ELs attend.

Although ESL enrollees likely constitute only a small subset of the broader EL population, much of the available research focuses specifically on them. These studies (which do not always specify whether the ESL courses under study are offered as noncredit or for-credit) generally suggest that students who enroll in ESL courses in college experience poorer postsecondary outcomes than those who do not take ESL.

⁵ The Public Policy Institute of California estimated that 10-12 percent of ELs residing in regions of California with high immigrant populations, including the Central Valley and Los Angeles County, enroll in ESL courses (Gonzalez, 2007).

Hodara (2015) analyzed longitudinal student transcript data from an urban community college system using an instrumental variable, difference-in-difference model to measure (1) the impact of placement in ESL compared to placement in developmental English and (2) the impact of enrolling in ESL compared to enrolling in developmental English. Hodara found that placement in ESL had a negative impact on accumulation of college credits within two years of initial enrollment. Hodara also found that first-generation students (foreign-born students attending college in the United States) and second-generation students (those born in the United States to immigrant parents) who enrolled in ESL courses accumulated 3.3 fewer college credits within one year of enrollment compared to their peers who enrolled in developmental English; at the end of their second year of enrollment, ESL students still had accumulated approximately 3 fewer college credits than their peers. (The differences in credit accumulation after one and two years of enrollment are both statistically significant.)

Several descriptive studies also point to poor postsecondary outcomes for ESL enrollees. In a longitudinal descriptive study of the course pathways of Latino ESL students in one large California community college district, Razfar and Simon (2011) found that 63 percent of their sample did not advance beyond the credit ESL course in which they first enrolled; only 5 percent of their full sample and 7 percent of the subset of students in their sample who declared their intention to transfer to a four-year college enrolled in a gateway college English or math course within five years of first enrolling in college. Similarly, Spurling et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study tracking the course pathways of students who enrolled in ESL courses at the City College of San Francisco in 1998-2000. They found that only about 8 percent of students who enrolled in noncredit ESL courses transitioned to credit-level courses within seven years of their initial enrollment, and only 44 percent of students who started in noncredit ESL advanced to the next higher proficiency level (of nine levels in total) in ESL over seven years. Finally, using nationally representative student data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 in an analysis that controlled for some observable student and institutional characteristics, Callahan & Humphries (2016) considered the combined effect of immigration and linguistic status on postsecondary enrollment; they found that first- or second-generation language minority students who both enrolled in ESL courses in high

school and completed college preparatory math courses were significantly less likely to enroll in a four-year rather than a two-year college, compared with students from other immigrant groups (native English speakers who immigrated to the United States and first- and second-generation language minority students) who completed the preparatory math but did not enroll in ESL.

While these studies suggest that ESL placement and enrollment may have negative implications for postsecondary outcomes, it is important to note that research also indicates that these patterns may vary depending on students' prior formal language instruction. For example, Hodara (2012) found that while first- and second-generation students at the City University of New York who enrolled in ESL accrued fewer college credits in their first, second, and third years compared to first- and second-generation students who did not enroll in ESL, this was not the case for Generation 1.5 students who were foreign-born but attended high school in the United States. In a descriptive study, Jiang and Kuen (2001) compared results of pre- and post-enrollment English literacy tests of 22 students enrolled in academic ESL courses at a California community college; they found that "late immigrant" students, who experienced 10 or more years of formal instruction in their native language before immigrating to the United States, exhibited higher gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary skills in the ESL courses than students who immigrated to the United States with less formal instruction in their native language.

5. Reviewing the Literature: Methods and Major Themes

We began our review of the literature by first engaging with experts in the field. These individuals are faculty at research universities whose scholarly work focuses on ELs.⁶ During our meetings with these experts, we solicited their perspectives on the scope and quality of the empirical research on ELs in postsecondary contexts in general and asked about research with direct or indirect implications for the community college

⁶ Experts were identified based on an initial scan of the literature and on recommendations of other scholars in the field.

EL student population more specifically. This process helped us identify and prioritize important issues and guided our literature search, including our selection of search terms.

To identify relevant literature, we searched a variety of research databases—EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest—and academic journals⁷ for the following terms: English learner, language minority, English as a second language, linguistic minority, emergent bilingual, and English language learner. The search was limited to literature published after 2001,⁸ when the federal government implemented the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB fundamentally changed if and how institutions track subgroups of students, including ELs, and thereby affected the availability and type of research on this population. The search was also limited to peer-reviewed research.

The results of the search yielded clusters of research on the placement, assessment, instruction, and identities of ESL students and ELs in community colleges. It also generated articles on K-12 ESL policy and K-12 ESL student experiences and outcomes. A subset of articles also addressed ESL teaching and learning in four-year colleges. Lastly, it produced research on international students, long- and short-term ESL students, and ELs who exit their status as ELs after a formal assessment, a process referred to as “reclassification” (Mavrogordato & White, 2017). The search results included works using several types of inquiry (e.g., theoretical, evaluative), as well as research employing a variety of methodological approaches (e.g., quantitative, case study, ethnographic). We subsequently narrowed the literature that would be reviewed in this paper by assessing its quality and relevance to our core interests.⁹ Table 1 summarizes the topics of the research generated by our search, indicates the number of articles by topic that were found (231), and specifies the number of articles that were reviewed (135) and are cited (64) in this paper. We refer to some of these articles in the

⁷ Among the journals we searched were *American Educational Research Journal*, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Community College Review*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Journal of Higher Education*, *Journal of Literacy Research*, *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and *Review of Higher Education*.

⁸ This paper refers a few articles published prior to 2001 that serve primarily to provide context on topics addressed.

⁹ Articles were included if they presented original research or important documentation of policies and practices relevant to ELs and ESL programs. Literature reviews and opinion pieces were excluded. Both descriptive and evaluative research was included.

earlier sections of this paper, and they inform our discussion of findings throughout the rest of the paper.

Table 1
Summary of Search Results

Topic	Number of Articles Found	Number of Articles Reviewed	Number of Articles Cited
Context			
ESL outcomes	28	25	9
ESL policy	24	15	7
High school context	26	16	1
Identification of ELs (K-12)	14	13	6
Assessment and placement of ELs	29	12	12
ESL Instructional delivery / course structure / pedagogy	94	43	18
EL identity	16	11	11
Total	231	135	64

Given our particular interest in the community college EL student population, three major themes emerge from our review. First, assessment and placement processes shape students' likelihood of completing college (Bailey, 2016). Research on traditional developmental education assessment and placement practices in community colleges has shown that misplacement is common (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014), which has implications for ELs enrolled in developmental English courses. It also suggests that assessment and placement for ESL programs should be examined carefully. To understand the academic progression and achievement of ESL enrollees, it is important to know how students are placed into ESL courses or alternative programming and how placement systems are structured.

The second theme concerns instructional delivery. Research on pedagogy and course structures in community colleges suggests that instructional delivery approaches can affect student learning and engagement in college (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Hern & Snell, 2013). Empirical work on curricular materials used in community college ESL courses has found that these resources have substantial implications for student-teacher and peer relationships, which in turn can affect student learner identities and classroom experiences (Harklau, 2000; Razfar & Simon, 2011).

Thus, examining research on ESL instruction may be relevant in understanding EL students' outcomes.

The third theme concerns EL student identity in community colleges. How students experience and are integrated into college is associated with their academic progress (Tinto, 1993; Karp & Bork, 2012). Bartolome (2010) has argued that the academic integration of ELs, in particular, may be precarious, given that the field of ESL has traditionally been shaped by English-only and assimilationist traditions that may affect students' self-efficacy and that may be perceived as denigrating to the cultural heritage of many EL students. Better understanding the research on how ELs' identities interact with school climate and institutional policies and practices may inform our understanding of what influences ELs' student achievement.

6. Federal and State Policies Affecting ELs

Since the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, ELs have been a subgroup of students covered by federal legislation and subject to accountability in K-12. This legislation, also known as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, recognized the unique needs of students with limited English language skills and provided districts with funds to support this population (Wright, 2005). The *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) decision took accountability further, mandating the provision of support for ELs in K-12 schools. While it did not stipulate what form that support should take, subsequent litigation (i.e., *Castañeda v. Pickard*) established criteria to ensure that districts did not ignore their EL students (Wiley & García, 2016). More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) included ELs in the federal K-12 accountability system and mandated the adequacy of their instruction and the disaggregation of their outcomes (Goldschmidt & Hakuta, 2017).

There is no direct federal education policy that focuses on supporting ELs who matriculate in college, but federal social policies dating back to the 1980s have included funding for noncredit continuing education ESL courses.¹⁰ The federal government has

¹⁰ Students must be 16 or older to enroll in adult education ESL courses.

funded these free ESL courses as part of workforce training policies designed to boost employment, beginning with the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 and including, most recently, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. Welfare policy has also been germane to the provision of ESL programming. With the passage of the Family Support Act in 1988 and its signature JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training) program, welfare recipients were required to participate in adult education (including ESL courses) or job search activities in order to receive federal assistance. The JOBS program was designed to raise educational attainment and increase employment for welfare recipients, including those with substantial English language needs. With the passage of the WIOA act, program funding is now tied to the outcomes of continuing education enrollees, including ESL enrollees. ESL enrollees must show regular improvement on tests administered at regular intervals as part of the courses in order for continuing education programs to maintain their funding.

While legislatures in several states have recently mandated changes in developmental English placement and programming (Ganga, Mazzariello, & Edgecombe, 2018) that could affect ELs, state legislation generally has had little direct influence on the provision of ESL coursework at colleges. One large recent exception to this is the 2017 passage of Assembly Bill 705 in California. While this new legislation is mostly concerned with developmental education provision (which itself has ramifications for some ELs), it clearly distinguishes instruction in ESL from developmental English and formally recognizes that students taking ESL coursework are “foreign language learners.” It also compels colleges to help degree-seeking students entering credit ESL programs to “complete degree and transfer requirements in English within three years” (quoted in Rodriguez et al., 2019, p. 7; California Community Colleges, n.d.). How this legislation will affect college practices statewide is not yet determined, though state higher education officials have begun to provide guidance to colleges concerning ESL placement.

It is also the case that state performance funding policies may be starting to sharpen policymakers’ focus on the experiences and outcomes of individuals who take (and pay for) ESL as matriculating college students. For example, performance-based funding formulas in Massachusetts, Mississippi, and Ohio financially reward colleges that increase the number of students completing college-level English within a given time

frame. This may provide an incentive for colleges to boost the outcomes of ELs enrolled in ESL and developmental English, as doing so would increase the pool of students eligible to take and complete college English. As interest in performance funding grows, there is potential for state policy to elevate the needs of ELs seeking college credentials.

7. Assessment and Placement

One area of institutional policy and practice that shapes the experiences and outcomes of ELs is the assessment and placement process (Llosa & Bunch, 2011), which determines whether students need to take ESL or developmental education courses before they can enroll in college-level coursework. Placement has serious implications for student outcomes; being placed into developmental education delays student progression and is associated with a lower chance of completion (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Ganga, Mazzariello & Edgecombe, 2018). While little research has been conducted on ESL placement practices per se, the literature on developmental placement may be relevant to ESL placement because the processes appear similar.

Research topics on developmental assessment and placement have included the use of a single assessment instrument (versus using multiple measures), the inaccuracy of placement test results, poor messaging around the placement process, and the implications of placement testing on student outcomes. This section of our review explains the assessment and placement issues facing ESL students. It primarily draws on lessons learned from the more plentiful body of research on students who undergo testing for possible placement into developmental English.

When students arrive at college, they are assessed using a placement test, their high school coursework, and/or SAT/ACT scores to determine their placement into reading, writing, and math courses.¹¹ Students may be placed into noncredit developmental English and/or ESL courses if they demonstrate low proficiency (i.e., below college readiness benchmarks) in reading and/or writing. Some colleges use a developmental writing placement test to determine both ESL and developmental writing

¹¹ There may be placement tests for other subjects at particular colleges.

placement, while other colleges use a separate placement test to determine ESL placement.¹²

Scott-Clayton, Crosta, and Belfield (2014) examined placement into developmental education in two community college systems and found that using results from a single test is a concern because it leads to errors in placement. Their predictive study found that when using a standardized placement test, 29 percent of English students and 19 percent of math students were underplaced. Underplacement occurs when a student is placed into developmental education when a predictive model suggests that they could have been successful in a college-level course. Notably, underplacement was a more common occurrence than overplacement in their analysis. Additional research exploring the impacts of placement into developmental courses suggests that the effects of remediation can be either harmful or beneficial to students, depending on their incoming levels of academic preparedness. In particular, a finding showing that students who score very low on placement tests may derive some benefit from remedial courses has possible implications for ELs who may be represented in this low-scoring group (Boatman & Long, 2018). These results may be relevant to students referred to ESL courses as well, because the student skills and needs, placement procedures, course structures, and instructional practices in developmental education and ESL have much in common; at the very least, the results suggest the need for further research on the long-term impacts of ESL placement among ELs. In addition, research on ELs should focus on student performance not only on developmental and ESL outcomes but also on how these courses prepare students for college-level English courses. Bunch et al. (2011) have argued that using a single placement instrument is problematic because it tests only a narrow set of skills that students need to possess—namely their ability to read and understand short passages—which alone may not serve them well in college-level English.

¹² Typically, incoming college students are assessed either for placement into developmental English (versus college-level English) or ESL courses (versus college-level English), but not both. College testing staff often use nonstandardized practices to recommend one kind of assessment or the other, but EL students sometimes either choose or can retain some influence on whether they are assessed for possible referral to developmental or ESL course programming.

ELs are a multifaceted and diverse population with varied academic strengths and needs. There is no consensus across colleges and systems on how to measure English proficiency. The task of implementing the most accurate ESL assessment and placement system is made difficult because it must account for variation in primary language, educational history, and generation status, in addition to level of English proficiency (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016; Kibler, 2014). Currently, the choice of instrument varies widely. Rodriguez et al. (2016) found that “no single assessment is used [consistently across California community colleges] to assess the ESL skills of incoming students,” (p. 15). Perhaps in response to these complications, California, among other states, is ending the exclusive use of assessment tests for placement into community college math, reading, writing, and ESL courses. Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705), passed in 2017, requires California community college students (including some ELs¹³) to be placed using multiple measures, including high school coursework, course grades, and grade point average (Assembly Bill 705, 2017; Rodriguez, Mejia, & Johnson, 2016).

Along with the placement system and assessment instrument, issues around placement messaging and information sharing can also shape ELs’ experiences and outcomes. Harklau (2008) found that ELs lack access to information about the transition to college. A lot of “college knowledge” is communicated orally within social networks or is written at an advanced level, both of which may disadvantage ELs. Biber, Conrad, Reppen, Byrd, and Helt (2002) examined course catalogs and college websites and found that the language used in these documents is more advanced than that of the textbooks and classwork with which ELs typically engage. In a state such as California, where a policy on ESL placement allows students to choose if they want to take ESL courses or not, Bunch and Endris (2012) found that ESL students are rarely explained their options. Specifically, they rarely know about their right to abstain from the ESL placement test or their right not to be mandated to take ESL courses.

¹³ Using high school information for placement is required for those ELs who have four years of U.S. high school information (or three years for direct matriculants in their senior year of high school). ELs who have less than four years of high school information are to be directed to the college ESL placement process (Perez, 2019).

8. Instructional Delivery

Research indicates that course structures and instructional practices have profound implications for how students in ESL courses progress and persist in college (Harklau, 2000; Razfar & Simon, 2011). This section describes community colleges' traditional approaches to ESL course structure, curriculum, and pedagogy, and how a nascent reform movement may be starting to reshape these approaches.

8.1 Language Acquisition and Course Structure

Theories regarding language acquisition in K-12 (where the bulk of research has occurred) have long held that students need a significant amount of time to reach “cognitive academic language proficiency” (Scordaras, 2009, p. 270). Research on second language acquisition suggests that reaching academic proficiency can take between four and 12 years (Cummins, 1981; Browning et al., 2000). Such theories and traditional notions about language acquisition inform the structure, content, and delivery of traditional ESL programs in community colleges.

ESL courses are distinct from other courses designed to develop college students' academic literacy in that they segregate ELs from their native English-speaking peers and from ELs who are not referred to or choose not to enroll in ESL. This segregation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, research indicates that this separation and the institutional label of “ESL student” contribute to a school climate that negatively impacts ESL students' perceptions of themselves as learners because they view their linguistic differences as deficiencies (Harklau, 2000; Ortmeir-Hooper, 2008; Miller-Cochran, 2012). On the other hand, some qualitative studies have documented benefits of placing ESL students into separate language and literacy classes. These positive outcomes include providing students with secure places to practice language and an instructor who specializes in offering services to students with differing linguistic needs (Miller-Cochran, 2012; Matsuda, 2006; Ortmeir-Hooper, 2008).

Traditional community college ESL programs may compound the segregation that is experienced because typical course sequences are so lengthy and include separate courses focusing on distinct literacy skills (e.g., writing, listening and speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and reading) (Hodara, 2012; Razfar & Simon, 2011). There are documented

instances of ESL course sequences consisting of as many as nine course levels (Bunch et al., 2011), and in some cases, students must also pass at least one or two levels of developmental English before they can enroll in college-level English (Hodara, 2012). Yet some colleges may also offer courses that integrate English language learning and disciplinary content (such as a course on English for business or health sciences) (Bunch & Kibler, 2015). Notwithstanding these occasional “content based” courses, ESL courses in community colleges are typically separate from disciplinary courses and have a curricular focus on discrete language skill instruction.

The lengthy sequences of ESL courses in community colleges have parallels to developmental education course sequences that students who are assessed as underprepared must take before enrolling in college-level English (Razfar & Simon, 2011; Hodara, 2012). Research on student progression through developmental education suggests that the majority of students do not complete their developmental education requirements not because they fail one of those courses but because they do not enroll in their first or subsequent course (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Similarly, lengthy ESL course sequences create multiple exit points that can hinder student progression. Patthey-Chavez, Dillon, and Thomas-Spiegel (2005) conducted a study in which they tracked students who attended ESL and developmental courses at nine California community colleges and two state universities; they found that only 8 percent of students beginning in the lowest levels of ESL passed a college-level English course, compared to 29 percent of students beginning in the advanced levels of ESL (as cited in Hodara, 2012).

8.2 Curricula and Pedagogy

Traditional efforts to prepare developmental students considered not yet ready for college-level instruction, especially those from language minority backgrounds, often mirror those undertaken in ESL courses, which tend to present language and literacy acquisition through the teaching of discrete skills (Bunch, 2013, Ivanič, 2004). In the classroom, this may correspond to isolated skill instruction in areas such as grammar, vocabulary, syntax, speaking, listening, and reading. Grubb and Gabriner (2013) described this phenomenon as “remedial pedagogy,” which signifies the decontextualized, segregated skills-based instruction observed in remedial and ESL classrooms in California. When used for writing instruction, for example, this kind of

pedagogy may emphasize particular discrete skills at different times throughout the course; instruction on grammar rules may be emphasized before moving on to sentence-level writing. Skills may also be segregated in other ways. Grubb (2012) described the use of a checklist for constructing a paragraph in an ESL course. The list included procedural steps beginning with forming a topic sentence and ending with a couple of sentences conveying the student's opinion (Grubb, 2012). He argued that this "part-to-whole" approach can be detrimental to students as they progress through college because it fails to help them understand how and when to apply different skills, and in particular how to apply these skills in disciplines other than English.

Ivanič (2004) posited an alternative multi-layered view of language and literacy acquisition that allows students to reflect on the kinds of mental and social processes they use to complete writing assignments or other literacy-related activities. To implement Ivanič's theory in the classroom, instructors could give students a writing assignment that is based on a particular real-world event or activity. This could be followed by class discussions focused on "the role of writing in the setting which has been chosen," the sociopolitical factors that are part of that setting, and "the mental and procedural processes" that students' use to complete the task (Ivanič, 2004, p. 241). This perspective conceptualizes language and literacies as shaped by power relations and sociopolitical factors. It also enables a pedagogy that moves away from language and literacy acquisition as the learning of isolated and discrete skills and toward something more holistic and contextualized (Ivanič, 1998; Fairclough, 1995).

8.3 Instructional Reforms

Reforms to ESL in community colleges are limited, and the available research suggests mixed results. In one descriptive study of reform efforts taking place within California community colleges, Bunch and Kibler (2015) identified areas of practice that aimed to shift away from a deficit perspective to what the authors termed "resource-oriented approaches." The authors discussed four main approaches: support for academic transitions in college; integration of language and academic content; accelerated access to mainstream, credit-bearing academic curricula and coursework; and the promotion of informed student decision-making. The authors found that in the community colleges in which interventions to ESL courses were resource-oriented and integrated with

disciplinary content (such as health), students in their course evaluations reported that their reading, writing, and grammar skills had improved, and that their content knowledge in the discipline was better. Students also felt that the courses prepared them for further disciplinary coursework associated with their future careers.

Bunch and Kibler (2015) also studied learning communities that linked ESL and developmental English with other courses. These course pairings allowed for the integration of language and academic content, and students reported that this structure enabled improvement in skills and stronger engagement with instructors and peers. For example, students enrolled in a learning community that paired an ESL course with a library course that introduced students to information research reported a substantial improvement in their own research skills. ELs enrolled in a learning community that combined developmental English with history reported receiving close attention from both the English and history instructors and reported that they were able to develop close relationships with their classmates (Bunch & Kibler, 2015).

Recent research on a redesigned accelerated and integrated skills–ESL program offered at a California community college has yielded positive results. Henson and Hern (2018) found that ESL students enrolled in the program began completing transfer-level English at higher rates and in less time than did similar ESL students enrolled in the multi-course, multi-semester traditional model. Using data from a large urban community college system, Hodara and Xu (2018) employed a regression discontinuity design to compare the impact of taking developmental reading and writing coursework simultaneously versus taking just writing coursework on the academic outcomes of language minority students who were near the cusp of being referred to developmental reading and writing. They found that for language minority students scoring near the cutoff scores on developmental reading and writing placement tests, taking both disciplines together versus just developmental writing alone had positive effects on their persistence in college and on their performance on a system-wide college proficiency exam.

Very recently, research on different kinds of ESL reforms occurring in California community colleges has suggested that particular reform features can improve completion rates of transfer-level English among degree-seeking ESL students

(Rodriguez et al., 2019). These features include: integrated sequences that teach multiple language skills per class; pathways that skip developmental English and lead directly to transfer-level English; and transferable ESL courses for which credits are awarded that transfer to a CSU and/or UC school. Of the features examined, taking a transferable ESL course was found to have the largest effect on students' transfer-level English completion, and the effect was stronger for students beginning in the top two levels of ESL. The authors also conducted ESL faculty interviews as part of the study, in which instructors reported that transferable ESL courses have the potential to motivate students' aspirations given that students have the opportunity to advance toward a degree or transfer while learning English. In addition, the rigor in these courses was reportedly of a higher standard than in other ESL courses as they are considered "university-level foreign language work" (Rodriguez et al., 2019, p. 18).

However, research has also shown that acceleration reforms may have negative consequences for some students enrolled in ESL. Scordaras (2009) conducted a study examining an accelerated, six-week mini-mester developmental English course in a community college in which ESL students were enrolled. The author found that the diversity of skill levels among ESL students in the accelerated class was a challenge for the instructor. Scordaras also found that an intensive pedagogical model appeared detrimental to lower-level ESL students in the class particularly because these students struggled with basic literacy skills taught in such an intensive course with time constraints that hindered extended opportunities for them to work on individual skills separately and which may have required additional instruction time. Scordaras thus argued that accelerated writing courses may ultimately put lower-level ESL students at a disadvantage, potentially subjecting them to multiple course failures and hindering their progression to credit-level courses.

Traditional approaches to ESL programming in community colleges present a variety of challenges for students enrolled in ESL courses. While there is an emerging reform movement, the traditional structure, curriculum, and pedagogy dominates and should be explored closely, as research has shown that it could be undermining the success of the growing EL population.

9. English Learner Identity

English learners enrolled in ESL and other courses bring multiple linguistic repertoires and varied cultural perspectives to community college that may be overlooked and undervalued. Neither languages nor cultures are bounded entities; they are historically, socially, and politically constructed categories that shift based on contextual dimensions (Garcia & Wei, 2015; Kroskrity, 2010). Given the primacy of context in enacting particular aspects of language and culture, this section examines research on EL identity to better understand the ways in which the college setting—its norms, rules, structures, and actors—may affect the self-perceptions and related academic behaviors of ELs.

Scholars studying linguistic minorities have long advocated for more constructive representations of the cultural and linguistic diversity that ELs bring to college (Nuñez et al., 2016; Harklau, 2000). Garcia and Wei (2015) have written about how multilingual and multicultural students enter college with additional skills, including a metalinguistic awareness, that enables them to negotiate how and when they use different variations of language or understandings of culture. ELs who are multilingual have also been found to understand and interpret classroom material in ways that are more cognitively advanced and complex than monolingual students (Nuñez et al., 2016). Such cultural dexterity has not been historically rewarded in institutions governed by traditions of compliance and assimilation (Garcia & Wei, 2015). To the contrary, these seemingly beneficial features of ELs' identity interact with dimensions of college culture in ways that often devalue linguistic diversity, reinforce negative stereotypes, undermine academic confidence, and impede academic success (Almon, 2015; Oropeza et al., 2010; Curry, 2004; Smoke, 1998; Harklau, 2000).

ELs in college often come to view their multilingualism as a liability because their identities as linguistic minority students are highlighted in negative ways inside and outside of the classroom. Oropeza et al. (2010) found that students feel inhibited from actively participating in class because they are ashamed of their accents. Further, Nuñez et al. (2016) chronicled research indicating that students are discouraged from speaking languages other than English on college campuses. Similarly, in an interview study at one community college, Almon (2015) found that the institution failed to create a campus

climate in which ELs feel valued. Instead, the climate tended to make students feel marginalized, which manifested in difficulties with academic behaviors that are important for college success, such as interacting with peers and faculty and participating in class discussions.

The ESL label, in particular, may have an impact on how faculty and other students perceive EL students and how EL students view themselves as academic learners distinct from those who are placed into non-ESL college courses. Research has shown that students resist being grouped into a homogenized ESL student category, in part because associated stereotypes not only portray students as deficient but also neglect to acknowledge that there is variation in ESL student experiences and educational backgrounds (Harklau, 2000; Chang & Sperling, 2014). Harklau (2000) found that students' resistance to ESL-associated stereotypes took shape in different forms that included not engaging in classroom activities and even withdrawing from their ESL courses. In presenting case studies of immigrant students attending a public four-year college, Ortmeir-Hooper (2008) found that the institutionalized ESL label can be particularly problematic for Generation 1.5 students educated at U.S. high schools once they reach college and are placed differently from other U.S. high school graduates. Such labels, according to the author, "can have a profound effect on how students define themselves in the college classroom" (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008, p. 393) and how they reconcile their linguistic identities.

How ESL students are understood and depicted is not static across educational settings. In a three year-long ethnographic study of students that began at an urban high school, Harklau (2000) found that the common representation of high school ESL students as "well-behaved, hardworking, and persevering" was shaped by perceptions of the immigrant experience (Harklau, 2000, p. 51). The positive characteristics associated with this representation led to strong relationships with teachers, teachers' positive evaluations of ESL students, and effective classroom performance. However, the findings also show that once these students entered the community college setting and were designated as ESL students, the commonplace representations of themselves that they encountered were less favorable. Positive perspectives about the immigrant experience were replaced with assimilationist expectations ("students' need for cultural orientation")

and xenophobic skepticism (a disregarding of “students’ cultural experiences and affiliations”) (Harklau, 2000, p. 52). Perhaps exacerbating these changes were the depictions of language minority students that the subjects of the study found in their textbooks. Harklau found that the community college used ESL textbooks and literature that favored an archetype of the visiting international student for modelling in examples rather than a U.S.-educated linguistic minority student. ESL immigrant students thus found few illustrations of persons with similar backgrounds as their own in such materials, which could contribute to a sense of exclusion.

Shifting the institutional factors that perpetuate negative representations, stereotypes, and ideologies about ELs may be as essential to their academic success as changes to assessment and placement and the delivery of effective English language learning support. Cultural and contextual factors play a large role in how ELs see themselves as college students and in determining how they perform and persist in college.

10. Conclusion and Implications

As the proportion of ELs who are enrolled in community colleges continues to grow, it is imperative that research be undertaken to more accurately identify these students and more systematically track their experiences and outcomes in postsecondary education and beyond. Notwithstanding substantial gaps in the current literature about ELs, this paper provides a review of existing relevant research evidence, which suggests that there are multiple factors that negatively impact the academic performance and persistence of ELs who enroll in ESL programs. This paper highlights three central issues that likely have a strong influence on ELs’ progression through college.

Assessment and placement. Key aspects of ESL assessment and placement practices have the potential to undermine the academic progression of ELs. These include the ways in which students are initially identified to take ESL placement tests, the use of a single assessment instrument for determining placements, and the messaging around the assessment and placement process. Research on developmental education course placement practices may provide pertinent lessons on how systems for determining ESL

placements could have negative consequences for many students, including delayed progression or stopping out.

Instructional delivery. Structural, curricular, and pedagogical approaches to ESL programming suggest that lengthy, multi-course sequences focused on discrete skills and taught using a traditional remedial pedagogy may impede students from advancing through ESL coursework in a timely manner and from developing broad competencies that are applicable to their non-ESL coursework.

English learner identity. The community college context profoundly shapes representations of ELs (and other language minority) students in ways that could be detrimental. The ways in which ELs are depicted in the college context matter because this can influence these students' views of themselves as college students and learners, which can affect their engagement and academic achievement in college.

This review of the literature suggests that further research on community college ESL courses and EL students is necessary. In order to develop effective state and institutional policies and practices that support students who enroll in community college ESL courses, more information is needed on how to better identify and disaggregate the EL population given the diversity of their English language learning needs and their academic and career goals. How do academic outcomes for ELs who enroll in academic ESL courses compare with those of ELs who enroll in developmental English or college-level English? Research is also needed to better understand the instructional delivery of ELs' community college coursework in ESL, developmental English, college-level English, and other disciplines. What kinds of opportunities do students have to develop language and literacy practices that will serve them in their academic and professional careers, and what kinds of supports best serve them? Finally, there remain many unknowns about the factors that contribute to how students enrolled in ESL are represented within colleges and how these representations impact ELs' academic and social integration and the negotiation of their identities. Research focused on college culture and climate is necessary to better understand these dynamics. The scale and scope of research required to fill the existing empirical gaps on ELs in community colleges is daunting but necessary to substantially improve the academic outcomes of this growing proportion of the college-going population.

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