

Long-term English Learners (LTELs): Predictors, Patterns, & Outcomes

Brief 1: Defining LTEL



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Overview. This is the first in a series of briefs the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) will release on long-term English learners (LTELs). The full study will examine LTELs in Texas, with particular focus on 10 Houston-area public school districts. Currently, there is no formal definition of LTEL in Texas. The purpose of this brief was to compare three common definitions of LTEL (remaining an English learner for more than three years, more than five years, and more than seven years) using seven criteria based on its research and practitioner application to identify the most useful definition. The definition of LTEL as remaining EL after five years satisfied the most criteria. Using this definition of LTEL, HERC will move forward with this study by examining characteristics of LTELs and the schools that serve them, overall patterns of reclassification for ELs and LTELs, and the educational outcomes of LTELs.

KEY TERMS:

ENGLISH LEARNER (EL): A student whose primary language is other than English and whose English language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary classwork in English¹

LONG-TERM ENGLISH LEARNER (LTEL): An EL student who remains EL after several years in school

RECLASSIFICATION: The process by which an EL student is identified as English proficient and no longer classified as a English learner

Main Finding

- Based on the seven criteria outlined in this brief, **we recommend LTEL be defined as remaining EL after five years in school.**

Background

Over the last two decades, the number of English learners (ELs) in Texas public schools has doubled. In the 2019-2020 school year, 1.1 million students were classified as ELs which is about 20% of the total student population. In Texas, the EL population and their reclassification have garnered increased attention due to state and federal accountability standards. Many ELs reclassify in a timely manner and go on to achieve academic success; however, some remain ELs for several years despite involvement in programs aimed at improving their English-language skills. These students tend to struggle academically and are often referred to as LTELs. Despite increased attention on LTELs in academic research and state and federal accountability reporting, neither Texas nor the federal government has a set definition; moreover, the definition of LTEL used by practitioners and researchers is not always consistent (e.g., Brunner, 2012; Olsen 2014; Thompson 2012).

Defining LTEL

Common definitions of LTEL based on number of years remaining EL

LTEL is typically defined by the number of years an EL student has spent in U.S. schools before reclassifying. Most commonly, LTEL is defined as remaining EL after three years, five years, or seven years. Depending on how LTEL is defined, between one-quarter and one-half of all students who enter elementary school as EL become LTELs (Olsen 2014).

Seven criteria were established to compare the definitions and select one definition of LTEL to be used in this study. The following criteria were used to determine whether the definition:

- Has been used in previous research and literature
- Aligns with Texas policy
- Aligns with federal report requirements and policy
- Predicts later educational outcomes of students
- Provides ample opportunity to direct additional resources to students
- Identifies a subpopulation (i.e., less than half) of ELs as LTEL
- Receives support from public school district personnel

LTEL after three years

- ✓ Use in previous research
- ✗ Aligned to Texas policy
- ✗ Aligned to federal policy
- ✓ Predicts student outcomes
- ✓ Allows for time for intervention
- ✗ Identifies subpopulation of ELs
- ✗ Support from district personnel

LTEL after five years

- ✓ Use in previous research
- ✓ Aligned to Texas policy
- ✓ Aligned to federal policy
- ✓ Predicts student outcomes
- ✓ Allows for time for intervention
- ✓ Identifies subpopulation of ELs
- ✓ Support from district personnel

LTEL after seven years

- ✓ Use in previous research
- ✗ Aligned to Texas policy
- ✗ Aligned to federal policy
- ✓ Predicts student outcomes
- ✗ Allows for time for intervention
- ✓ Identifies subpopulation of ELs
- ✗ Support from district personnel

LTEL after five years met the most criteria

Previous Research – Various definition of LTEL are found in previous research; however, research has typically defined a student as LTEL if they remained EL between five to seven years after school entry (Brunner, 2012; Flores et al., 2012; Kibler et al., 2018; Menken & Kleyn 2009; Olsen, 2014).

Texas policy – The state of Texas anticipates that EL students will reclassify as English proficient within five years of school entry. EL students in Texas public schools are assigned an EL progress measure plan upon entering Texas public schools that [cannot exceed five years](#). EL students are assessed on their English proficiency using the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS). The TELPAS includes four levels of English proficiency; students are expected to advance one level of proficiency each school year. Therefore, students who are considered beginning in their English proficiency are expected to have become fully proficient within four years; although, students with extenuating circumstances are allowed an extra year to become English proficient.

Federal Policy - Recent changes to reporting requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require districts to report the number and percentage of ELs who have not reclassified within five years, suggesting that states and districts can consider ELs who have not reclassified after five years as LTELs (U.S. DOE, 2016).

Defining LTEL

Student Outcomes – Using a sample of students in 10 Houston-area public school districts, each definition of LTEL was assessed on its ability to predict three unwanted educational outcomes: failing a course, grade retention, and high school dropout. All three definitions were associated with increased chances of students experiencing each outcome. The results of this study can be found in a forthcoming HERC technical report.

Time for Intervention – Given the association between LTEL status and students having unwanted educational outcomes, identifying students as LTEL could provide districts with an indicator of students needing additional supports and services. According to Houston-area public school personnel, waiting more than seven years to identify a student as LTEL diminishes the amount of time between being classified and the start of high school relative to the other definitions. Alternatively, identifying EL students as LTEL after three years or after five years means there's more time between identification and the start of high school to provide additional supports and services. This timing often translates into students being able to take advanced coursework preparing them for post-secondary success (Holzman, Sánchez-Salazar, and Chukhray, 2020).

Identifies a subpopulation of ELs – Given limited school district resources to provide services for LTEL students above and beyond what is provided to EL students, it is important that a definition of LTEL encompass only a sub-population of EL students who require additional intervention to become English proficient.

Support from district personnel – HERC informally surveyed personnel from 10 Houston area public school districts for feedback on these LTEL definitions. A majority of personnel selected the definition of LTEL after five years as the most appropriate definition. Below, are select testimonials from district personnel in support of this definition:

“At five years, students' basic interpersonal communication skills begin to belie their lack of cognitive academic language proficiency and they become more susceptible to ‘falling through the cracks.’ As a result, this is when... targeted interventions can change the trajectory of students' academic lives.”

“Per research it takes five-seven years under ideal educational circumstances (such as strong L1, low mobility, placement in appropriate research-based program model, ESL endorsed teachers across all content areas) for a student to become proficient in L2.”

“Any EL that started in 1st grade and has not reclassified by middle school is not yet English proficient. Regardless if the student was serviced in an ESL program or a dual language program, the student has been provided adequate time to acquire English.”

“Texas reports EL years in U.S. schools up to four years. After that, students are reported as five-plus years. Also, since the expectation in Texas is to progress one proficiency level each year, using three years as an indicator is too soon...”

Recommendation

Based on the seven criteria outlined in this brief, we recommend that the state of Texas **define students as LTEL if they remain EL after five years** in school. This definition of LTEL will be used for the purposes of this study.

References

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About HERC. Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between Rice University and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision makers – culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.



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