

Newcomer Students' English Language Development

A Summary Brief

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This brief summarizes key findings from the *Bilingual Research Journal* article “Understanding Newcomer English Learner Students’ English Language Development: Comparisons and Predictors.” The study analyzed incoming English proficiency and subsequent English language growth among newcomer students, and further explored how these compared to those of their non-newcomer peers classified as English learners. We found that, on average, newcomer students have low initial English proficiency levels but their English proficiency develops quickly. There is wide variation in newcomer English level and growth patterns, however, and evidence suggests that schools play an important role in fostering growth. Exploratory evidence shows that newcomers (vs. non-newcomer English learner peers) enter school at earlier stages of English proficiency but their proficiency grows faster, especially in their first 2 years.

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Introduction

Newcomer students, a subgroup of students classified as English learners (ELs), are characterized by immense diversity of language, birth country, generational status, sociocultural background, ethnic/racial identity, age, and more. California does not yet have a consistent definition for who constitutes a newcomer student, but in this study we define newcomers using the federal definition for “immigrant” students: K–12 students who were born outside the United States and who have been in U.S. schools for fewer than 3 full academic years. Better understanding the needs and learning trajectories of this group of students is key to supporting individual students with educational services that meet their needs and engage their strengths.

Although newcomer students are often included under the umbrella of general EL policies and practices, newcomers differ from other EL-classified students in important ways. The majority of non-newcomer EL-classified students are born in the U.S.¹; they enter school and begin receiving EL services in kindergarten, with services typically adjusting as students advance in grade and English language proficiency (ELP). Newcomers, by contrast, arrive at all grade levels and require EL services that meet their English and academic needs independent of their grade of entry. Central to understanding how to support and serve newcomers is understanding their linguistic skills and needs, including, but not limited to, their incoming language and literacy knowledge in their home language(s) and English and their subsequent growth in those languages.

Newcomer students have characteristics, backgrounds, and resources that differ, on average, from those of non-newcomer EL students. As such, we might expect their ELP growth patterns to differ as well. A first critical difference is that newcomer students, as a group, are far more heterogenous than non-newcomer EL students with regard to background characteristics like home language and socioeconomic status. Research examining data from two states found that while 80 percent of non-newcomer EL students speak Spanish as their primary language (aligned with the national average among EL-classified students), fewer than 50 percent of newcomers do.² Larger proportions of newcomer students instead speak other languages, including Arabic, Somali, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Swahili. Similarly, considerably smaller proportions of newcomer EL students live in low-income households compared to non-newcomer EL students.

EL students’ progress towards English proficiency is a required component of federal accountability systems.³ By law, schools must provide EL-classified students with instruction towards English language development. For teachers and administrators, understanding students’ English skills and needs is paramount to facilitating curricular access and learning. As such, a substantial body of literature has documented patterns of EL-classified students’ ELP growth. However, less is known about the ELP growth of newcomer students specifically. This brief summarizes a research study captured in the full article “Understanding Newcomer English Learner Students’ English Language Development: Comparisons and Predictors,” published in the *Bilingual Research Journal*,⁴ which sought to address gaps in our understanding of ELP levels of newcomer students and patterns in the growth of their ELP.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the average incoming ELP status and growth trajectory among newcomer students?
2. What factors are associated with newcomer students' initial ELP and growth in proficiency?
3. How do newcomers' initial ELP and growth in proficiency compare to those of EL-classified students in their same grade levels who are not newcomers?

For the purposes of this research, newcomers' English language development is measured by standardized ELP assessments, as this is a key goal for immigrant students⁵ and a strong predictor of these students' schooling outcomes.⁶ Furthermore, ELP assessment scores are primary indicators that qualify students for EL identification and services and later enable them to exit EL classification. The results from these investigations will have important implications for providing language supports and academic course access to newcomer students in schools.

Background on English Proficiency Development in English Learners

The process of developing English proficiency extends across many years of schooling, regardless of specific individual or institutional contexts. Estimates of the average length of time for EL-classified students to develop English proficiency typically range from 3 to 8 years,⁷ with evidence that oral language proficiency develops more quickly than reading and writing.⁸ The National Academies estimates that between 10 and 45 percent of EL-classified students do not yet have "full proficiency" by the upper elementary grades.⁹

Trends in English language growth belie the heterogeneity of the EL-classified student population and the complex factors influencing ELP growth. For example, there is evidence that English language development slows over time and at higher proficiency levels.¹⁰ EL-classified students who enter in kindergarten who are not reclassified to fully English proficient status by the end of upper elementary grades are increasingly unlikely to ever be reclassified.¹¹ Of note, the pattern of slower annual growth at higher levels is not unique to language growth; it is also observed in content-area assessments among the full student population.¹²

Data and Methods

We drew on longitudinal student-level administrative data from an anonymous state for the academic years 2013–14 through 2017–18. Our models estimated ELP growth rates by examining the relationship of time, measured by grade, to ELP. Our primary outcome variable was students' scale scores on the WIDA ACCESS assessment. ACCESS is an annual English language proficiency assessment used in 40 states for the purposes of assessing students' English proficiency and their eligibility for reclassification. For more on data, methods, and sensitivity checks used for this study, see the full article.¹³

Findings on English Proficiency Development in Newcomer Students

Characteristics of the newcomer population suggest multiple possible hypotheses regarding English proficiency level and growth, albeit in complex ways. From one perspective, newcomers, by definition, are first-generation immigrants while non-newcomer EL students predominantly are not. Research has found different educational trajectories between first-generation students and those born in the U.S. First-generation immigrant families have important personal, familial, and community assets that can facilitate growth and success in school.¹⁴ On the other hand, newcomers' initial ELP is, on average, lower than that of their non-newcomer EL peers,¹⁵ and a far larger proportion of newcomer students compared to non-newcomer ELs have histories of limited or interrupted formal schooling—often due to inaccessible education in students' birth countries or lost schooling during the immigration process.¹⁶ Although first-generation status and low initial ELP both suggest a hypothesis of fast English growth, low initial ELP may suggest longer times to proficiency, and those with interrupted schooling may have slower growth than their peers with uninterrupted schooling. This research sought to test hypotheses about newcomer students' English proficiency level and growth to bring clarity to our understanding of their language development.

What is the average incoming ELP status and growth trajectory of newcomer students?

This study finds that newcomer students show dramatically rapid growth, especially in their first and second years in U.S. schools. Newcomer students, on average, enter school with an English proficiency scale score of 282, advancing 40 points their first full year in U.S. schools, 23 points their second year, and 7 points their third. This means that if we take, for example, a newcomer student entering at fifth grade—which is the median entry grade among newcomers—they would enter at an ELP of 282 and would be expected to grow to 322 points between their first and second years. This indicates growth between proficiency level 1 (entering) and level 2 (beginning):¹⁷ a one-level gain (out of five levels) in 1 year.

This rapid language proficiency growth would be expected to continue, although it would slow over time. That same student would gain one additional proficiency level, reaching proficiency level 3 (developing) during the subsequent 2 years.

Because some newcomer students are reclassified within their first 4 years in U.S. schools, these growth models represent a conservative estimate of growth, as the students with the highest ELP and/or fastest growth are the most likely to exit the data and therefore not contribute to our estimates of growth.

What factors are associated with initial ELP and growth among newcomer students?

The analysis of newcomer language proficiency growth rates showed high levels of variation among students, suggesting the importance of other factors related to individual students' rates of ELP growth. Several student-level demographic factors had a significant relationship to ELP level and growth, including entry grade, socioeconomic status, home language, disability status, refugee status, and unaccompanied minor status.

The largest differences related to entry grade and disability status. Newcomer students who entered school at lower grade levels had lower ELP in their first year, but their ELP grew more quickly than newcomer students who entered at higher grade levels. Newcomer students ever identified as having a disability also had lower ELP in their first year and significantly slower growth than newcomers without disabilities.

Other differences related to free or reduced-price lunch status and refugee and unaccompanied minor statuses. Newcomer students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch had lower first-year ELP and somewhat slower growth than other newcomer students, although these differences were small. Newcomer students who were refugees or unaccompanied minors had significantly lower ELP in their first year, but they showed faster ELP growth, on average, than other newcomers.

One factor that did not appear to be related to ELP status at entry or growth rate was participation in a bilingual program. Newcomer students in bilingual programs had similar initial ELP and growth rates compared to newcomers who were not in bilingual programs. This suggests that, at a minimum, English development is not hampered by providing instruction in newcomer students' home languages.

The data suggest that the composition of a newcomer's school peers has some association with initial ELP. Students in schools with higher concentrations of students who had ever been classified as ELs tended to have lower first-year ELP levels. However, newcomers showed similar ELP growth regardless of the concentration of ever-ELs within their schools as well as the concentration of other students who shared their home language.

Without controlling for student and school variables, 38 percent of the variation in newcomer ELP growth patterns between different schools was attributable to the school level. Including student and school covariates reduced this to 18 percent, suggesting that student, program, and school characteristics explain some, but not all, of the variation in ELP growth observed across schools.

How do newcomers' initial ELP and growth compare to those of the EL-classified students in their same grade levels who are not newcomers?

Newcomer students had significantly lower ELP the first year they entered schools compared to their non-newcomer counterparts in the same grades; however, they tended to experience faster ELP growth. By their fourth year in U.S. schools, newcomer students were estimated to have caught up with the non-newcomer EL students in their same grade levels, accounting for grade, student, and school factors. For both groups of students, ELP growth was predicted to slow over time, with newcomers' growth slowing more quickly than that of non-newcomers.

Before taking into account school and school factors, 35 percent of the variation in ELP growth between newcomers and non-newcomers was explained at the school level. This increased to 57 percent once we accounted for student and school factors, suggesting that there is considerable variation in ELP growth across schools after controlling for key observable student and school factors. This is considerably higher than when looking at growth for newcomers only, indicating that less of the growth for newcomers, compared to all EL students, may be attributable to schools.

Nonetheless, these findings suggest that schools may play an important role in supporting the English language growth of both non-newcomer and newcomer EL students. Results also indicate that a driver of newcomers' faster growth was their lower initial ELP level, as the findings show that students with lower initial ELP tended to grow faster regardless of whether they were newcomers.

Conclusion

The backgrounds and linguistic and academic skill sets of EL-classified students vary widely. This diversity has direct implications for policy and practice because students with different skills and needs likely benefit from differentiated supports, services, and instructional techniques. This study examines one important subgroup of EL-classified students, those new to the U.S. Prior research has established that newcomers come from highly diverse backgrounds¹⁸ and that their needs often encompass those associated with their immigration experiences and adjustment to a new country with new norms and structures.¹⁹ Findings from this study confirm that newcomers tend to enter school with beginning levels of English proficiency and grow quickly, especially over the course of their first year in U.S. schools, but also during their second year.

We were interested in whether differences would be observed based on enrollment in a bilingual program, although we lacked data on types of bilingual programs (dual, transitional, or maintenance). Seven percent of the newcomer sample was enrolled in bilingual programs; however, we did not find that these students exhibited different patterns in initial ELP or ELP growth. Although this result may appear to run counter to prior findings of faster language growth, in both English and the primary language, in bilingual programs,²⁰ it is aligned with prior work that indicates that students in bilingual programs may catch up to and/or surpass their peers in English-only programs in the medium term.²¹ In other words, the limited duration (4 years) of the data analyzed for this study may not allow for a finding of differentiated growth. The blunt measure of enrollment in bilingual programs may also mask variation in student outcomes by type of bilingual program.²² Likewise, we did not find that school composition variables, including EL concentration and the proportion of the school that shared a given student's primary language, were associated with faster or slower English growth.

Although program and school features were not significantly associated with ELP differences among newcomers, we did find meaningful differences associated with student-background characteristics. The largest differences were found by entry grade, with students coming to the U.S. in higher grades having higher initial ELP but considerably slower growth over their first 4 years in U.S. schools. We also found sizable differences between the ELP levels and growth of newcomers with and without disabilities, findings that lend themselves towards a critical examination of the structural barriers that EL students with disabilities face in schools.²³

Implications for Policy and Practice

Results from this study suggest that **newcomers' first years in U.S. schools are a window of opportunity where we can expect many students' ELP to grow quickly**. However, our findings about the strong role of schools in ELP growth suggest that teachers and administrators should not take rapid ELP growth among newcomers for granted but should instead build on students' language skills to support their rapid growth. Existing research points to **promising programs and services** supporting robust linguistic development. These include:

- bilingual programs focused on maintaining and developing home language and English literacy;²⁴
- pedagogies designed to provide students with meaningful and rigorous access to content-area curricula;²⁵
- equitable course-placement policies at the middle and high school levels;²⁶
- linguistically flexible learning environments that welcome translanguaging and full use of students' linguistic repertoires;²⁷ and
- ample and meaningful academic peer interaction.²⁸

Of note, schools explained more variation in ELP growth in higher grade bands compared to lower grade bands in our analysis, suggesting that secondary schools had a larger influence on the language-growth trajectories of students, compared to elementary schools. **The types of programs and supports highlighted above, while important across all grade levels, may be particularly critical in middle and high schools.**

Knowing patterns of ELP growth is useful for policymakers, administrators, and teachers. For example, this knowledge can be used to inform states' ELP progress indicators in their ESSA plans. Likewise, it can inform teachers' and specialists' understanding and assessment of student growth patterns. Newcomer students whose growth is slower than that of their newcomer peers between their first and second years could potentially have underlying needs that should be identified and attended to. Growth patterns for newcomers entering in middle and high school are slower than for those entering in elementary grades. As a result, **it is critical that school systems and educators not penalize, fault, or otherwise pathologize students entering at higher grade levels.** As shown in this analysis, such rates of growth are normative for EL-classified students from varied backgrounds.

Importantly, none of our findings suggest that academic or linguistic expectations should be lowered for any group of EL-classified students: newcomer or not. By contrast, these results add to existing research confirming EL students' skills and growth, including recent work indicating that EL-classified students' reading typically develops as fast or faster than non-EL students,²⁹ pointing to the importance of "amplifying"³⁰ rather than restricting curricular quality and access for EL-classified students. Our findings also add to the growing understanding that students' pace of English growth is varied and that both individual characteristics of students and characteristics of their schools and schooling experiences are related to their linguistic growth.³¹

Endnotes

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Related Publications

Reed, S., Hurtt, A., Hibel, J., & Garrett, D. (2022, May). ***Serving English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

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