

Research Brief

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To reclassify or not reclassify: The how is as important as the when

A Literature Brief on EL Reclassification

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This research brief is intended to provide an overview of current knowledge on reclassification practices for students classified as English learners (ELs).¹ We envision it will be useful for new district leaders and research teams joining the Stanford-Sequoia K-12 Research Collaborative as well as for existing collaborators. We answer some key questions our district partners have raised about reclassification and summarize key learnings for those who would like additional information about the most recent research on this topic.

What is EL reclassification?

Reclassification is the gateway for students classified as English learners (ELs) to exit remedial language development services and obtain greater access to mainstream instruction. ELs reclassified as fluent English proficient (RFEP) are perceived to be able to meaningfully engage with grade-appropriate content without needing additional language development support.

¹Today, research and practice in the field prefer to use a less stigmatized term—multilingual learner (ML)—to refer to these students who are acquiring language and content simultaneously. Due to the reference to federal and state policies, in this literature brief, we use the term, English learner (EL), consistently to prevent any confusion.

Why is it challenging to study the effects of EL reclassification?

Nationwide, states have different policies and regulations on reclassification (e.g., the amount and arrangement of criteria).² Within each state, districts and schools have separate interpretations and implementations of federal and state policies. These decentralized and heterogeneous practices make the impacts of reclassification highly contextualized and limited for generalization or replication.³

What are the policies for reclassification in California?

The California Department of Education demands four criteria for EL reclassification: (1) assessment of English language proficiency (e.g., the summative English Language Proficiency Assessments for California, ELPAC), (2) teacher evaluation, (3) parent consultation, and (4) basic skills relative to English proficiency.⁴ Despite efforts to standardize the set of tools used for reclassification (e.g., the adoption of ELPAC as the primary measure of English language proficiency; the development of the Observation Protocol for Teachers of English Learners (OPTTEL)⁵ to guide teacher evaluations; etc.), EL assessment and reclassification vary across contexts because districts determine the specific basic skills used as criteria for reclassification and the ways in which the teachers' evaluations and the process of parent consultation are implemented. Another factor that hampers reclassification is that students who have met language proficiency and basic skills requirements may not be reclassified due to biased judgment or administrative slippage. Given these difficulties, it is very difficult for students to meet many reclassification requirements simultaneously.^{6 7 8}

Landscape of Reclassification in California: Local Variety

Due to local control, some districts set either more or less stringent criteria than those established by the state. For example, according to a report surveying the landscape of EL reclassification in California during the 2020-2021 school year,⁹ some districts used measures of English proficiency in addition to the ELPAC assessment. Meanwhile, other districts reported less stringent criteria. Among those using the ELPAC (99% of the sample), 10% did not follow the state-mandated threshold (an overall performance level of 4 since January 2019) and chose Level 3 or the combination of Levels 3 and 4 from different domains (reading, writing, speaking, listening) instead.

The selection of criteria thresholds can often hold ELs to higher standards than monolingual students. While most districts use the state English language arts summative assessment—CAASPP ELA—to benchmark students' basic skills, there is an almost even split between those choosing the “standard met (Level 3)” and those choosing the “standard nearly met (Level 2)” cut points. The assumption is that ELs who meet ELPAC proficiency (Level 4) will also meet the standard (Level 3) for their English language arts achievement. However, an empirical cross-examination of ELPAC-CAASPP performance led by Linquanti and colleagues in 2018 found that most ELs who scored an ELPAC overall Level 4 fell short of reaching Level 3 (standard met) at CAASPP ELA, and 43% of English-only students did not meet the grade-level benchmark either.¹⁰ This confirms the concern that ELs are held back with higher standards than mainstream peers regarding their language and content learning.¹¹

²Linquanti, R. & Cook, H. G. (2015). Re-examining Reclassification: Guidance from a National Working Session on Policies and Practices for Exiting Students from English Learner Status. CCSSO.

³Cimpian, J. R., Thompson, K. D., & Makowski, M. B. (2017). Evaluating English learner reclassification policy effects across districts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1_suppl), 255S-278S

⁴<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/rd/>

⁵<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/t3/optel.asp>

⁶Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879-912.

⁷Thompson, K. D. (2017). English learners' time to reclassification: An analysis. *Educational Policy*, 31(3), 330-363.

⁸Estrada, P., & Wang, H. (2018). Making English learner reclassification to fluent English proficient attainable or elusive: When meeting criteria is and is not enough. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(2), 207-242.

⁹Hill, L., Lee, A., & Hayes, J. (2021). Surveying the Landscape of California's English Learner Reclassification Policy. Public Policy Institute of California.

¹⁰Linquanti, R., Huang, M., & Crane, E. (2018). Attachment 3. Report on Supplemental Empirical Analyses of the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California. State Board of Education.

¹¹See Hill, L., Lee, A., & Hayes, J. (2021); footnote 9.

What do we know about EL reclassification patterns in California?

At the elementary level, ELs are more likely to be held back by English proficiency (e.g., English language criteria via ELPAC scores); meanwhile, at the secondary level, ELs are more likely to be held back by their academic achievement (e.g., typically the basic skills criteria via CAASPP scores). Among the four domains of ELP assessments, ELs struggle most with reading.^{12 13 14 15 16 17}

Reclassification rates generally peak at 5th grade, decrease in subsequent grades, and eventually stall in high school. Students who have maintained their EL status for six or more years in the public school system (from kindergarten to fifth grade) are least likely to be reclassified later and thus become long-term ELs (LTELs). LTELs are more vulnerable to downstream outcomes, such as high school drop-out or ineligibility for college admission.^{18 19}

Why are reclassification rates lower at the secondary level?

The diminishing trend of reclassification at the secondary level is not a coincidence but a consequence deriving from mechanisms in the education system, such as tracking practices and inadequate teacher education/professional development on second language acquisition/bilingual education. Deficit mindsets towards ELs also put these students in a detrimental cycle during their schooling experience. Because of their emerging English proficiency, ELs are more likely to receive diluted/simplified curriculum, experience lower expectations from teachers, be taught by inexperienced teachers, and be assigned to lower-track learning paths.^{20 21 22 23} As a result, they are less likely to perform well on large-scale standardized tests (which are more difficult in upper grades), be on track for high school graduation, or attend four-year colleges. Additionally, ELs' sense of belonging, motivation to learn, and other socio-emotional skills are negatively affected by their reclassification results and the time spent in remedial programs.²⁴

How has reclassification been studied?

Quantitative researchers have focused much of their attention on factors affecting reclassification decisions. Among many other, such factors include: student's race/ethnicity, gender, and primary language proficiency; type or intensity of language instruction; school system; years taken to be reclassified; and outcomes of reclassification.^{25 26 27 28 29} The most used analytical method to understand the impact of reclassification is regression discontinuity. This approach takes the heterogeneity of EL groups into consideration and compares only students who are at either side of the reclassification threshold to simulate a randomized control trial of "treatment" and "control" students—e.g., students right above the threshold or right below the threshold.

¹²See Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014); footnote 6.

¹³Robinson, J. P. (2011). Evaluating Criteria for English Learner Reclassification: A Causal-Effects Approach Using a Binding-Score Regression Discontinuity Design with Instrumental Variables. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(3), 267–292.

¹⁴Thompson, K. (2012). Are we there yet?: Exploring English learners' journey to reclassification and beyond. Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.

¹⁵Hill, L., Betts, J., Chavez, B., Zau, A., & Volz Bachofer, K. (2014). Pathways to fluency: Examining the link between language reclassification policies and student success. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California.

¹⁶Parrish, T., Merickel, A., Perez, M., Linqanti, R., Socias, M., Spain, A., & . . . Delancey, D. (2006). Effects of the implementation of Proposition 227 on the education of English learners, K-12: Findings from a five-year evaluation. Final report for AB 56 and AB 1116. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and WestEd.

¹⁷Robinson, J. (2011). Evaluating criteria for English learner reclassification: A causal-effects approach using a binding-score regression discontinuity design with instrumental variables. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(3), 267–292.

¹⁸See Thompson, K. D. (2017); footnote 7.

¹⁹Johnson, A. (2019). A Matter of Time: Variations in High School Course-Taking by Years-as-EL Subgroup. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 41(4), 461–482.

²⁰García, O. (2015). Language policy. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences* (2nd ed., Vol. 13) (pp. 353–359). Oxford, UK: Elsevier.

²¹Pappamihel, E. (2007). Helping pre-service content-area teachers relate to English language learners: An investigation of attitudes and beliefs. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(2), 42–60.

²²Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suarez-Orozco, M. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

²³Gutierrez, K., & Orellana, M. (2006). What's the problem? Constructing different genres for the study of English learners. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(1), 118–123.

²⁴Lee, M. G., & Soland, J. G. (2023). Does reclassification change how English learners feel about school and themselves? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 45(1), 27–51.

This kind of analysis allows researchers to interpret any change in student outcomes as closely associated with the reclassification decision since students right above or below thresholds are presumably similar. However, regression discontinuity has produced mixed results across different contexts. Results from this form of analysis are difficult to generalize due to the variety of reclassification practices across states, especially at the secondary level.³⁰

Researchers also use qualitative methods, such as interviews and classroom observations, to study the local school contexts and figure out in detail the specific sets of circumstances that shape ELs experiences and course trajectories. Ideally, using qualitative methods in combination with quantitative methods allows examination of reclassification issues at different levels of granularity. A model for reclassification research using mixed methods consists of using the quantitative lens to uncover patterns in the system first, and then following up with qualitative analyses to examine specific cases and contexts.³¹

What are areas of research consensus on reclassification?

While the diversity of contexts limits the ability to generalize findings, researchers agree that exiting the category of EL should take place at the end of elementary school.³² Students being reclassified by the end of fifth grade and joining mainstream classrooms thereafter tend to perform comparably to or even better than their English-only (never-EL) peers in secondary schools. On the contrary, students that are reclassified by the end of middle school need to catch up with their English-only peers in terms of their academic performance. However, they are more likely than students who are reclassified during high school to graduate from high school and become eligible for college admission.³³ Exiting the EL classification can unlock more course-taking opportunities, such as credit-bearing and standard-aligned content courses that are unavailable for ELs due to the fact that their schedules conflict with the schedules of mandated English language development (ELD) programs.

Intensive ELD support may have optimal and long-term effects for ELs when it is provided in early school grades—high-quality curricular and concentrated ELD instruction can boost English proficiency, which enables ELs to participate, sooner rather than later, in mainstream classrooms without additional language support.³⁴ These findings support the notion that only one criterion, a standardized English language proficiency test, should be used to reclassify ELs.³⁵ At the secondary level, language interventions should be differentiated according to both students' language proficiency and history of schooling.³⁶ To be able to support ELs' learning, general education/content teachers need a growth mindset and knowledge of second language acquisition.³⁷ Ideally, instruction should value effective communication over grammatical accuracy when students attempt to make meaning through social interaction in mainstream classrooms.³⁸ Moreover, assessment practices and curricular selections relevant to course placement should aim to provide equitable access to broader and rigorous learning for all students, avoiding triaging ELs into lower tracks or pushing/restricting them to vocational pathways.

²⁵See Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014); footnote 6.

²⁶See Thompson, K. D. (2017); footnote 7.

²⁷Flores, S. M., & Drake, T. A. (2014). Does English language learner (ELL) identification predict college remediation designation?: A comparison by race and ethnicity, and ELL waiver status. *The Review of Higher Education*, 38(1), 1-36.

²⁸Umansky, I. M., Callahan, R. M., & Lee, J. C. (2020). Making the invisible visible: Identifying and interrogating ethnic differences in English learner reclassification. *American Journal of Education*, 126(3), 335-388.

²⁹Clark-Gareca, B., Short, D., Lukes, M., & Sharp-Ross, M. (2020). Long-term English learners: Current research, policy, and practice. *TESOL journal*, 11(1), e00452.

³⁰Johnson, A. (2020). The impact of English learner reclassification on high school reading and academic progress. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(1), 46-65.

³¹See Cimpian, J. R., Thompson, K. D., & Makowski, M. B. (2017); footnote 3.

³²Pope N. G. (2016). The marginal effect of K-12 English language development programs: Evidence from Los Angeles schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 53, 311-328.

³³Carlson, D., & Knowles, J. E. (2016). The effect of English language learner reclassification on student ACT scores, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment: Regression discontinuity evidence from Wisconsin. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 35(3), 559-586.

Conclusion

To sum up, the question with EL reclassification is not just about when best to reclassify students but also about how. “Ideally, students would stay in EL status for precisely as long as they need to receive support services. However, language proficiency is multidimensional and difficult to capture fully. So the key is not identifying the perfect moment for reclassification, but matching support services to individual students’ needs”³⁹ and not creating unnecessary, unfair barriers for academic promotion.

³⁴See Pope N. G. (2016); footnote 32.

³⁵If basic skills must be included to make reclassification decisions (e.g., example students’ scores from CAASPP ELA), calibrating the cut score relevant to the average performance of other (non-EL) students at the grade level is more realistic and equitable for ELs. A downside is that the threshold would become a moving target requiring yearly adjustment, and ELs in high-performing districts might face more challenging reclassification standards. See Hill, L., Lee, A., & Hayes, J. (2021); footnote 9.

³⁶See Clark-Gareca, B., Short, D., Lukes, M., & Sharp-Ross, M. (2020); footnote 29.

³⁷See Estrada, P., & Wang, H. (2018); footnote 8.

³⁸Kleyn, T., & López, D. (2020). Teaching current immigration issues to secondary immigrant and US-born students: Interdisciplinary dialogic learning for critical understandings. In *Reconceptualizing the Role of Critical Dialogue in American Classrooms* (pp. 132-156). Routledge.

³⁹See Johnson, A. (2019), p.48; footnote 19.