

Research Brief

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[Full Study
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Research on English Learner Classification and Reclassification

Purpose and Overview

Although the proportion of English Learners (ELs) varies across states, the national average is about 10.6%, roughly one in every ten students.¹ In California, however, the numbers are double this, with nearly one in every five students classified as an EL. As of 2024, 17% of California students were identified as ELs, compared to 20% in San Mateo County. This consistent difference highlights San Mateo's uniquely diverse linguistic landscape and likely reflects local demographic patterns, enrollment shifts, and reclassification practices that differ from broader state and national trends.²

Even with the high proportion of ELs both statewide and nationwide, there are no consistent guidelines in the U.S. for how students are classified or reclassified as ELs. As a result, schools and districts often develop their own approaches that best fit the needs of their student populations. Research shows that differences in the classification and reclassification process matter: the EL label is not merely an administrative category, it shapes students' future access to the curriculum and influences pathways to graduation and college access.³ Understanding how these systems work—and where they fall short—is essential for building more equitable educational opportunities. The purpose of this study was to synthesize 25 years of empirical research on the classification and reclassification of English Learner (EL) students in the U.S. PK–12 schools, examining how these systems have evolved and how they affect students' access to instruction and long-term educational outcomes.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). English Learners in Public Schools. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved [date], from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf>.

² California Department of Education. (2024). English Learner enrollment by county, 2014–25: San Mateo County. DataQuest.

³ Padilla, Amado M., Xinjie Chen, Elizabeth Swanson, and Diana Mercado-Garcia. "A 13-year longitudinal study of students who enter kindergarten as English learners: early vs. late reclassified fluent English learners." *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (2025): [10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1562699](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1562699).

Findings

A total of 29 studies published between 2006 and 2024 met the eligibility criteria for inclusion, revealing five key themes. While studies came from across the U.S., 12 were conducted in California, reflecting the state's central role in English Learner research.

Theme 1: Timing Shapes Opportunity. A consistent finding across the studies is that reclassification occurring earlier—most often in elementary school—is associated with fewer academic restrictions and greater access to the general curriculum. In contrast, delayed or long-term reclassification is linked to constrained high school curriculum that leads to advanced coursework, including college-preparatory honors and AP classes.

Theme 2: Instruction and Relationship Matter. Teacher expertise, family engagement, and supportive relationships consistently predict better outcomes. Students reclassify sooner and thrive academically when schools create relationally rich and instructionally supportive environments. Studies highlight how supportive relationships, particularly with teachers and family members foster English language development and contribute to earlier reclassification. Effective instruction and teacher access to professional development are consistently linked to stronger student outcomes. Additionally, family engagement and sustained home-school communication are identified as key factors promoting EL student motivation, persistence, and success.

Theme 3: Student Backgrounds Influence Trajectories. Immigrant students often acquire English proficiency faster than U.S.-born ELs, and boys are more likely to become LTELs. However, factors such as disability, and parental educational status remain understudied. These intersections are critical to understand how educational contexts shape both English language development and opportunities for early reclassification.

Theme 4: Studies focus on quantitative data with limited information on the qualitative data. Most studies use large-scale, quantitative data to track reclassification over time. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often miss the lived experiences of students and educators navigating these systems. More qualitative and mixed-method research is needed to capture classroom realities and reclassification IEP policies and practices.

Theme 5: Systems and Policies Are Uneven Across States and Districts. Reclassification criteria differ across districts and states. Inconsistent standards contribute to uneven implementation and may prolong EL designation for some students. These findings raise equity concerns as a student may be considered EL under one policy model but not another. Such inconsistencies raise questions of fairness and highlight the need for clearer, more coherent state and federal guidance.

Key Takeaway

The timing of reclassification matters, earlier exit from EL status is often linked to positive long-term academic outcomes. Both school and home environments play a vital role in supporting English Learners, emphasizing the importance of teacher relationships and family engagement.

Individual factors, including disability status, gender, and country of birth, also shape students' experiences and progress toward reclassification. At the systems level, there is high variability in how districts and states define, assess, and support ELs pre- and post-reclassification, leading to uneven educational opportunities.

Finally, it is important to recognize that classification systems are not neutral nor are policies and practices for reclassifying students as English proficient. These policies and practices determine students' access to instruction, their sense of identity, and their long-term educational outcomes. Educators play a central role in ensuring these systems promote equity rather than reinforce barriers.