

Reaching language proficiency takes time and requires attention to students' linguistic, cultural, and academic needs.

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Academic achievement for English learners What can we reasonably expect?

As the cultural and linguistic diversity of U.S. schoolchildren grows and as federal legislation mandates greater accountability in school districts, states are feeling a sense of urgency to support successful outcomes for English learners.

Over 5 million students are learning English in America's public schools, accounting for more than 10% of the K-12 population. That's an increase of over 50% in the last decade alone. This demographic change has been matched by changes in national policy. Before No Child Left Behind, states set their own accountability policies. Now, they must demonstrate that English learners are making progress in English and achieving challenging academic content standards. When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reauthorized, it will likely continue the trend of establishing and meeting explicit expectations for this growing population.

Assuring that English learners succeed has proven to be much more challenging than most educators assumed. The challenge appears to be rooted in what it means to "learn English" in school. Academically successful English learners do not simply learn to manage their everyday lives in English-speaking contexts; rather, they learn to

negotiate multiple academic environments, make sense of complex content, articulate their understanding of that content in academic forms, and assess their own growing understanding. That is, they learn to use "academic languages."

Instruction for English language learners has shifted emphasis from supporting social English to emphasizing more academic English; the research on academic achievement for English learners strongly supports this shift.

Education research describes the language demands English learners face in American schools in terms of the linguistic and literacy skills associated with core academic subject areas (Anstrom et al., 2010). These skills involve more than specialized, content-specific vocabulary. Proficient use of English in science class, for example, involves the ability to communicate scientifically. That is, English used in science classrooms draws on vocabulary, grammar, and discourse unique to science.

For example, scientists seek to be objective. They

often use the passive voice in their writing and speaking. For example, rather than stating what a plant root or leaf does (active voice), a biology teacher is more likely to describe a general process through which water and nutrients are absorbed by root systems and are transported to leaves where carbohydrates and sugars are produced (passive voice). Why? Because the passive voice suggests distance or objectivity. Similarly, each academic discipline uses specialized vocabulary, grammatical structures, and discourse features. All students must learn to speak, write, and think in these specialized ways, but the journey for English learners is longer and more difficult.

In this article, we share findings about the journey to English proficiency for English learners and offer insights on how to establish clear expectations for English learners and their schools. We address the relationship between academic language and academic content proficiency, the rate at which English learners acquire academic English, and the time needed for English learners to become English proficient.

Specifically, we focus on two questions:

- What does it mean to be "English proficient?"
- How long does it take English learners to reach this status?

There isn't enough good research in this area to give clear answers to those who teach English learners, but some studies provide valuable insights. Also helpful are discoveries from the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA), a 27-state alliance that shares English language proficiency standards and assessments, and engages in research and professional development.

Federal policy

The English that teachers speak with students in the classroom is different from the English spoken on the playground, in the mall, or at home. English used in informal settings has less complex grammatical forms, few uses of technical vocabulary, frequent use of slang and idioms, frequent cultural and contextual references, and a much more personal sense. By contrast, academic language has more complex grammatical forms, more technical vocabulary, less use of slang and idioms, clearer references, and a more objective sense. Moreover, different academic disciplines have their own "discourses." These aspects of language are strongly associated with literacy and academic achievement. To develop academic language requires support, instruction, and enculturation. English language instructional programs that support English learners in American schools have shifted emphasis from supporting social English to emphasizing more academic English. This shift is strongly supported by research on English language development in schools.

In the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), an English learner (formerly known as a Limited English Proficient

Student) is defined in part as a student:

whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English may be sufficient to deny the individual (i) the ability to meet the states' proficient level of achievement on State assessments . . . ; (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

This definition is critical to understanding what "English proficient" means, at least from the federal perspective. It establishes three criteria to identify what it means to be English language proficient: 1) proficiency on state content assessments, 2) success in the classroom, and 3) full participation in society. What full participation in society means is debatable; the first two criteria can more easily

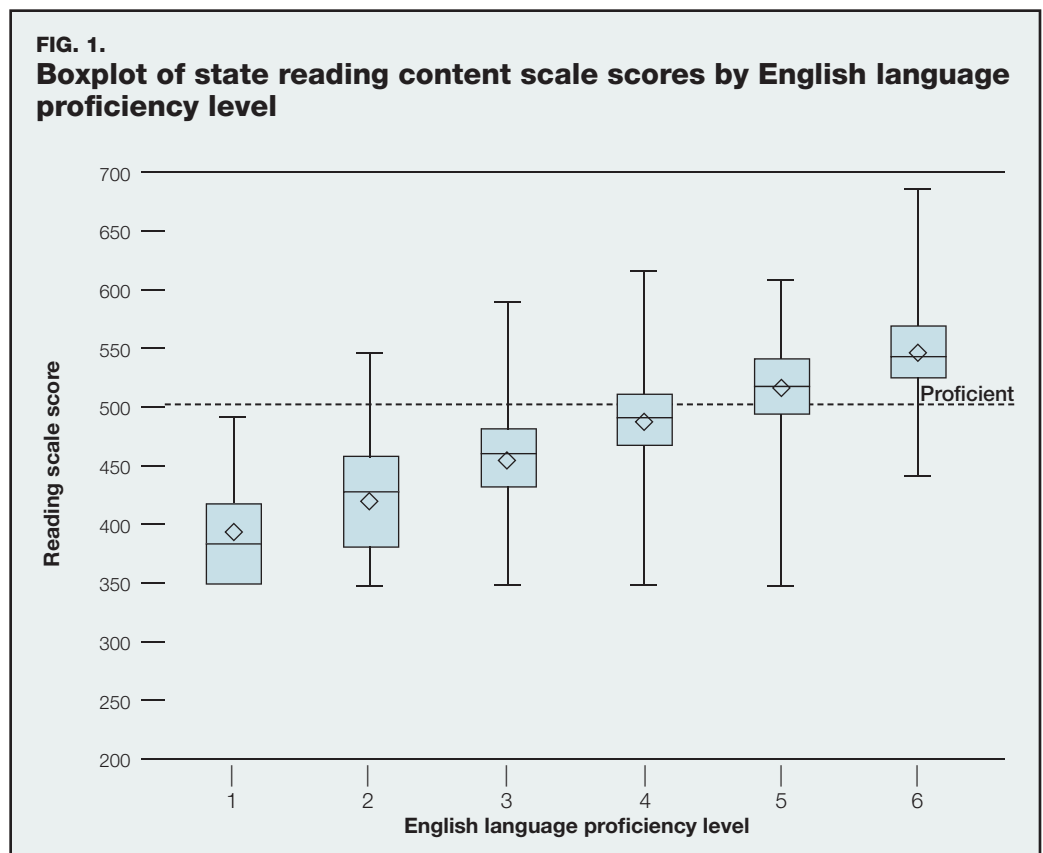
be described objectively. This article focuses exclusively on the first criterion, while acknowledging that the second is at least as important.

An English learner's ability to be proficient on a state content assessment is a product of content knowledge and proficiency in academic English. WIDA has begun to explore this relationship using state assessment results. NCLB requires states to annually assess English learners in their English language proficiency and to use those assessment results to define what English proficient means. When NCLB was passed, many states did not use academic language assessment data to help define "English proficient." Instead, they used professional judgment, a somewhat subjective method. But after several years of including English learners in both state academic content and English language proficiency assessments, states began to exam-

ine the relationship between these two types of assessment more rigorously.

To describe English proficient status relative to state content assessment performance, however, states first had to develop a working definition of that relationship. States in the WIDA Consortium defined English language proficient as the point at which students' English language proficiency becomes *less* related to academic achievement. Beyond this point, English learners' performance on content assessments is more related to content knowledge than to language proficiency.

Note one important distinction: Federal law does not say that in order to be English language proficient, English learners must be proficient in academic content. Rather, they must "have the ability" to be proficient. How might we determine what that "ability" is? One simple approach is to



identify the English language proficiency level where over half of the English learners score proficient on state content assessments. Clearly, at that language proficiency level, most English learners are successful on state content assessments.

The boxplot in Figure 1 provides an example of this simple analysis, using results from one state’s English language proficiency assessment and academic content reading assessment. The English language proficiency (ELP) levels are on the horizontal axis, and the state’s academic reading content scale scores are on the vertical axis. The line on the vertical axis represents the reading proficient level on this assessment for a single grade.

Notice that as ELP level increases, the distribution of students’ reading scale scores also increases. In each boxplot, the line in the middle represents the median; the diamond represents the mean (average). The median reading scale score for students at ELP level 1 is somewhere between 350 and 400, while the average reading scale score for students at this level is slightly less than 400. At ELP level 5, the median and mean reading scale score is above the proficient line. At this point, over half of English learner students in this grade received a proficient score on the state’s reading content assessment. Based on our assumption, the English language proficient point would be somewhere between ELP level 4 and ELP level 5 for this grade in this school year.

This analysis can be repeated for other grades and other subject areas. Experts can use these analyses to establish or verify what English proficient means in a state. Several states have done this, and similar trends have been observed: the lower a stu-

dent’s language proficiency level, the less likely he or she is to be proficient. This type of analysis also points to problems with accountability models that do not take into account English learners’ proficiency levels.

How to boost proficiency?

There is a perception that learning English in school should take, at most, a couple of years. But the available research suggests that it takes much longer. For example, Hakuta et al. (2000) write:

The overriding conclusion . . . is that even in districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to [English learner] students, oral proficiency takes three to five years to develop and academic English proficiency can take four to seven years.

In a paper examining English learners’ language proficiency growth, Cook and Zhao (2011) examined the time needed to attain an English language proficient score in one WIDA state. Figure 2 displays results from their analysis.

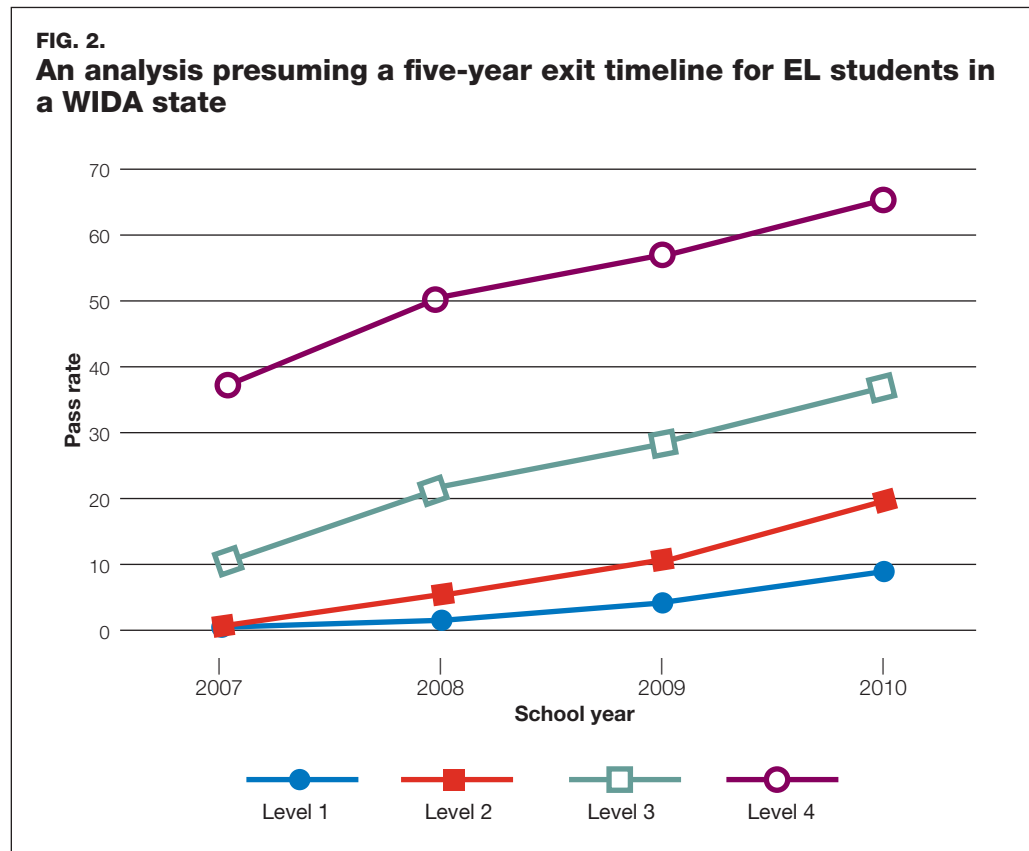
This study looked specifically at how many students with the same initial language proficiency level attained an English proficient level (termed “pass rate” in the figure) in five years. Two-thirds of students starting at an ELP level of 4 attained proficiency in five years. Only 10% of students at the lowest level attained a proficient score in five years. Thus, where students started affected how many attained proficiency.

Several caveats need to be stated about these findings. First, this analysis looks only at students who started in the 2006 school year; thus the

data may show something specific to that cohort. Second, about one-third of the English learners who started in 2006 were unaccounted for, due, we suspect, to the high mobility of English

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learner students. Third, this growth trend was observed over a single five-year period in a single state. There is no reason to believe this rate of growth is what it should be or could be. Arguably, students



In Figure 2, only four years are shown because students’ initial proficiency level was received in the 2006 school year.

starting at lower proficiency levels should be attaining English proficient scores at higher rates within five years, but we do not have evidence that this occurs.

These caveats notwithstanding, Cook and Zhao's study tends to confirm previous research findings on time to proficiency for English learners. It also points out that it takes different amounts of time to reach proficiency depending on where a student begins. Under current accountability policy, English learners are placed into a single subgroup, with the implication that they are a homogeneous group with similar needs and rates of growth. Cook and Zhao clearly show that English learners who begin at different proficiency levels attain proficiency at different rates. The variation measured in this study does not take into account that English learners come from a variety of native languages, come from many cultures, or have different educational backgrounds and experiences in their home countries. Given this group's essential heterogeneity, different timelines to proficiency should be expected. Thus, the four- to seven-year timeline suggested in the literature seems reasonable.

Conclusion

English learners consistently perform below grade level in all content areas on accountability measures. On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 46% of English learner 4th graders scored "below basic" in mathematics, compared to 18% of non-English learners; for 8th graders, 71% of English learners scored below basic, compared to 30% of non-English learners. Achievement gaps between



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English learners and non-Hispanic white students on the 2005 NAEP were 35% in 4th grade and 50% in 8th grade. A 2006 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study of state test data found that a smaller percentage of English learners achieved proficient test scores on content tests than any other subgroup. English learners are also nearly twice as likely as their native English-speaking peers to drop out of high school (Rumberger, 2006).

For American schools to address this achievement gap, they must define "proficient" in terms of the language demands of academic classrooms and the lengthy process of becoming able to meet those demands. If policies are better informed, resources and guidance for practice must follow. Research suggests that the academic achievement of English learners in American schools is inextricably tied to long-term support for academic

language development within socioculturally appropriate environments.

More specifically, the research presented here has at least two implications: First, comparisons between English language proficiency and academic content proficiency measures must be part of the process that states use to define what English proficient means. Second, representations of the growth of English learners' achievement must respect the fact that English learners grow at different rates. These growth rates are mediated by many factors; clearly, one is students' initial proficiency level. Research also points to other important variables that affect growth, such as student poverty and access to academic curriculum (Callahan & Gándara, 2004).

In an increasingly diverse society, schools must be held accountable for the academic development of all students, but in ways that acknowledge

and reward growth over time and define academic achievement appropriately. The reauthorization of ESEA will likely mean a push for even greater accountability for English learners. Let us hope that it pushes us to address their linguistic, cultural, and academic needs in ways that ensure their success. ■

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