



August 2014

## **High-stakes at a high speed: The inclusion of English Language Learners for accountability purposes after only one year of enrollment**

According to No Child Left Behind's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, after only one year of enrollment English Language Learners (ELLs) must participate in a statewide assessment. Although the results of the assessment have the potential to shine a light on ELL students and their unique needs, there is concern surrounding the fact that allowing only one year for these students to become proficient in both the English language itself and the content knowledge for the test simultaneously is not enough time to do either sufficiently well.<sup>1</sup> This is not only a concern for fair assessment at the student level but also for fair evaluation at the school level, where the inclusion of ELLs' scores in the calculation of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and for school accountability purposes also presents a concern.

Research indicates there is an unfair disadvantage to districts, schools, and individual classrooms with large ELL populations under this requirement, given that ELLs' scores are counted for measures that impact school funding and reputation.<sup>2</sup> In just one year's time, ELLs are expected to not only learn and be assessed on content, but they must simultaneously learn English in order to keep up with their peers<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, this subgroup of children often does not achieve age-appropriate mastery of English or content knowledge in order to meet grade level expectations<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, where there are large populations of ELLs, this is often compounded by a limited capacity to be able to provide the significant support that would be

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<sup>1</sup> - Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English Language Learners: What research does – and does not – say. *American Educator*, 32(2), 8-44. [https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae\\_summer08.pdf](https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae_summer08.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> - DeVoe, J.J. (2007). ELL testing: a state of flux. District Administration. Retrieved from <http://www.districtadministration.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=1293>

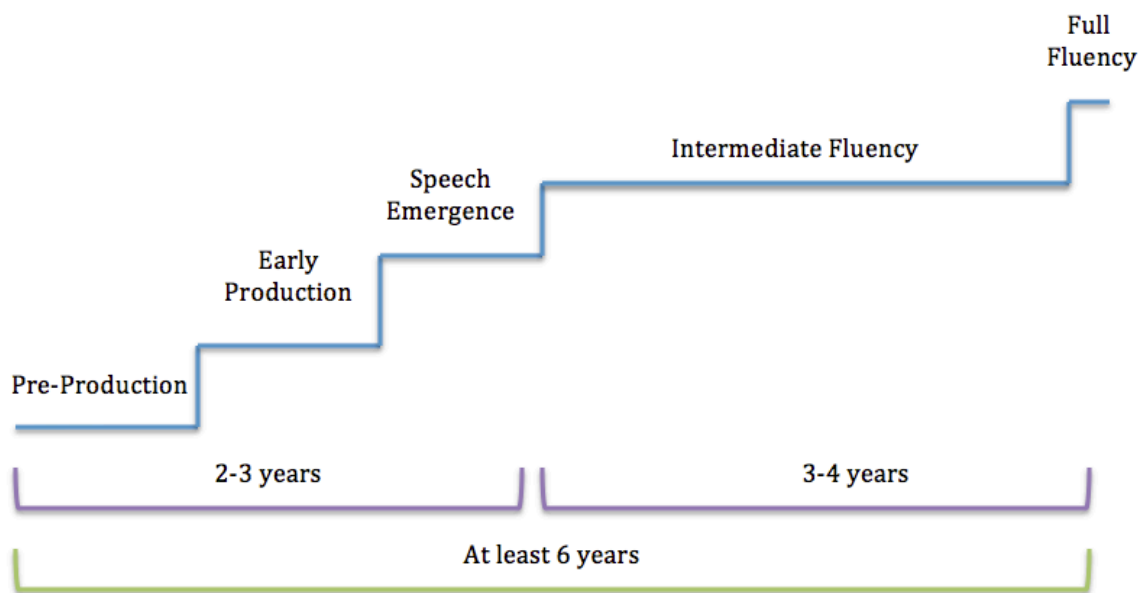
<sup>3</sup> - Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English Language Learners: What research does – and does not – say. *American Educator*, 32(2), 8-44. [https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae\\_summer08.pdf](https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae_summer08.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> - Genesee, F., & Lindholm-Leary, K. (2012). The education of English language learners. In K. Harris, S. Graham, & T. Urdan (Eds). *APA Handbook of Educational Psychology*. Washington DC: APA Books.

required to address the students' unique needs and accelerate their learning at this rate.<sup>5</sup>

Looking at the levels of language proficiency and the estimated timeline for development, there is strong evidence that fluency within one year of English immersion is far from the norm. *Figure 1* below provides a visual of the projected timeline through the levels of language proficiency, which typically takes a minimum of six years for an ELL to gain full or advanced fluency with the English language.<sup>6</sup>

*Figure 1. Projected timeline to move through language proficiency levels*



While the exact number of years to achieve full mastery of the English language varies based on the individual student, this timeline shows a general trend for students' progression through the various levels of language proficiency that far exceeds one year. Despite the variety of labels given to the proficiency levels in literature, there is consensus to support that it typically takes an ELL a minimum of six years to move from the beginning stages to native-like, advanced fluency.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, J., Stecher, R., O'Day, J., Naftel, S. & LeFloch, K.C. (2010). *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, Volume IX—Accountability under NCLB: Final Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>6</sup> - Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English Language Learners: What research does – and does not – say. *American Educator*, 32(2), 8-44. [https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae\\_summer08.pdf](https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae_summer08.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> - Forum on Educational Accountability. (2007, August). Assessment and accountability for improving schools and learning: Principles and recommendations for federal law and state and local systems. <http://www.edaccountability.org/AssessmentFullReportJUNE07.pdf>

Figure 1 shows the length of time it takes for ELLs to move through the first three levels (beginning to intermediate proficiency) compared to the longer span of time needed for the language learner to move out of the intermediate level and into full English fluency. ELLs typically progress much more rapidly through the first three levels than through the intermediate level, which is in part because of the significant differences between what the intermediate and full fluency proficiency levels demand.

Figure 2 shows the differences in the linguistic demands on the ELLs from the intermediate to the full fluency level.<sup>8</sup> It is important to consider that the statewide assessments the ELLs are expected to take most often require them to think and respond at a full fluency proficiency level.

Figure 2: Comparison between Intermediate and Full Fluency proficiency levels

Intermediate Fluency	Full Fluency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use of simple vocabulary and limited sentence structure variation</li><li>• ELLs can use the often highly context of a conversation to comprehend and communicate (gestures, intonation, nonverbal cues)</li><li>• Often used in familiar situations, such as for play, within daily routines, activities, and in informal conversations with friends</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Situations for language use are often less contextualized</li><li>• ELLs will need to use and understand more complex vocabulary and sentence structure</li><li>• Speaker must be able to comprehend the meaning of the words without nonverbal cues, gestures, and pointing always available</li></ul>

Additional research supports this projected timeline and the length of time needed for ELLs to gain conversational skills (2-3 years) versus academic language skills (5-7

<sup>8</sup> - Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English Language Learners: What research does – and does not – say. *American Educator*, 32(2), 8-44. [https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae\\_summer08.pdf](https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/summer2008/ae_summer08.pdf)

years)<sup>9</sup>. Given the number of years needed to achieve even intermediate, conversational skills and fluency, this suggests that ELLs will typically not be prepared within their first year of enrollment to successfully perform on a statewide assessment. Although taking this assessment as a diagnostic could gauge the student's understanding and help to monitor growth, it would not be a valid or reliable look into the students' or the schools' performance because it may be impossible to differentiate whether it is a lack of content knowledge or language proficiency, or a combination of both, that is causing the lower scores in comparison to peers.<sup>10</sup>

While it is of course not certain that any individual ELL student will score poorly on the assessment, there is evidence of unwavering achievement gaps between ELLs and native English speakers in the past decade. For example, in 2011, 36 points in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 44 points in 8<sup>th</sup> grade separated the ELLs and native English speakers in Reading achievement scores. The unsettling aspect is that the achievement gaps have shown no sign of narrowing for this population over the past decade.<sup>11</sup>

With the ELL population continually growing, currently exceeding 10% of the public school K-12 population<sup>12</sup>, there is a need to allow for time for these students to gain the language skills they typically do not learn from peers or at home.<sup>13</sup> Since these students have to split their attention between learning content and basic language skills, there is strong reasoning why these language-minority students struggle to keep up with their peers especially on tasks requiring them to demonstrate reading comprehension or writing abilities, common tasks on statewide assessments.<sup>14</sup> Whether this high standard is realistic within the time frame proposed has been debated in the research described, but there is a

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<sup>9</sup> - Lindholm-Leary, K. & Borsato, G. (2006). Academic achievement. In F. Genesee, K. Lindholm-Leary, W. Saunders, & D. Christian. *Educating English Language Learners: A synthesis of empirical findings*, pp.176-222. NY: Cambridge University Press. [http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating\\_English\\_Language\\_Learners.pdf](http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating_English_Language_Learners.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> - Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2006) *Educating English Language Learners: A synthesis of empirical findings*. NY: Cambridge University Press. [http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating\\_English\\_Language\\_Learners.pdf](http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating_English_Language_Learners.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (2013, January). *English Language Learners*. [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgf.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2006) *Educating English Language Learners: A synthesis of empirical findings*. NY: Cambridge University Press. [http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating\\_English\\_Language\\_Learners.pdf](http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating_English_Language_Learners.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on language-minority children and youth*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. (Executive Summary: [http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.cal.org/projects/archive/nlpreports/Executive_Summary.pdf))

notable difference in the time that is presently given to ELLs to be assessed and the 5-7 years typically required of them to achieve academic language needed to meet the high-stakes expectations that schools are being graded on and needed to show progress for each year.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> - Lindholm-Leary, K. & Borsato, G. (2006). Academic achievement. In F. Genesee, K. Lindholm-Leary, W. Saunders, & D. Christian. *Educating English Language Learners: A synthesis of empirical findings*, pp.176-222. NY: Cambridge University Press.  
[http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating\\_English\\_Language\\_Learners.pdf](http://medicine.kaums.ac.ir/UploadedFiles/Files/Educating_English_Language_Learners.pdf)