Exploring English Learners' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships

By Paula Arce-Trigatti | NNERPP

In This "Research Insights" Edition

NNERPP | Extra's "Research Insights" series brings together related studies from NNERPP members so that readers can stay current on member research, discover how studies or programs are connected, and advance our collective knowledge by generating new questions, ideas, or programs.

In this second edition of the series, we bring together work on English learners (ELs), highlighting two studies done by NNERPP members that assess students' progress towards English proficiency. We look across two reports that follow multiple cohorts of kindergartners to measure how many are English proficient within four or five years after entering school. In "Finding Their Stride: Kindergarten English Learners and Time to Proficiency in the School District of Philadelphia," the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium examines initial English proficiency of four cohorts of kindergartners, what percentage of EL kindergartners reach English proficiency by the end of third grade (i.e., within four years), and how this varies by student characteristics. Similarly, the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest also examines how many EL kindergarten students achieve English proficiency four or five years after kindergarten and how this varies by student subgroups, but their sample focuses on four districts in New Mexico and Spanish-speaking ELs, in particular.

Why This Research

We begin by providing a brief description of the context in which these studies occurred, both in Philadelphia and New Mexico.

PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia has seen a growing immigrant population in recent years, with most EL students entering the School District of Philadelphia in the early elementary years. Examining EL students' English proficiency upon school entry and their subsequent time to proficiency can inform the district's efforts in supporting these students. Additionally, Philadelphia has identified a literacy goal that all 3rd graders will read at grade level by the end of the school year, a goal that requires paying special attention to ELs' specific needs and progress toward English literacy.

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico public schools have one of the highest proportions of EL enrollment in the United States (14% of the state student population in the 2014/15 school year were ELs), the majority of which are Hispanic. The New Mexico Public Education Department has set the following goals for ELs for 2022 under ESSA: 51% of ELs to be proficient in English language arts and 50% to be proficient in math on the New Mexico Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (NMPARCC) assessment. Only 7% of ELs in grade 5 were proficient in either English language arts or math on the NMPARCC in 2016. Research around ELs' language and academic outcomes can thus inform the state's efforts in understanding how best to support these students.

continued on the next page

Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Current EL Supports

PHILADELPHIA

The School District of Philadelphia offers three main programs to support English Learners: Its English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program provides ELs with specialized language instruction and content area support; its Bilingual/Dual Language Programs, currently offered at six schools, put native English speakers and native Spanish speakers together for a shared learning experience; and its Newcomer Learning Academy, a four-year program for students aged 14-20 who are new to the U.S., provides a jump start on learning English. The district also provides a free four-week summer camp for Middle School ELs.

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico offers five state-funded bilingual multicultural education program models providing instruction in English and in the students' home language:

- Dual Language Immersion: Designed for both English speaking and non-English speaking students to develop full proficiency in English and their home language
- Maintenance: Students start out receiving instruction in English as a Second Language until they achieve proficiency and receive some content-area instruction as well as Language Arts courses in their home language
- Enrichment: Designed for students already fluent in English, this model focuses on students' further development in their home language
- Heritage: Designed to provide instruction in students' home language and English as a Second Language instruction
- Transitional: Has students initially instructed in their home language but transitioning into being instructed completely in English

Research Questions

Both reports were developed and produced within research-practice partnerships: The School District of Philadelphia and local non-profit organization Research for Action together form the Philadelphia Education Research Consortium. REL Southwest partnered with the New Mexico Achievement Gap Research Alliance, which includes a number of different stakeholder groups in New Mexico that are collaboratively working to address achievement gaps among Hispanic and Native American students.

Below we share the particular research questions that were addressed in each report:

PHILADELPHIA

- Among English learner students who enrolled in kindergarten from 2008–09 to 2011–12, what percentage reached English proficiency within four years? Are there differences in proficiency rates by student gender, home language, disability, or English proficiency at entrance to kindergarten? Are there differences in proficiency on the ACCESS language domains (i.e., speaking, listening comprehension, reading, and writing)?

NEW MEXICO

- What were the initial Spanish and English proficiencies of English learner students in kindergarten? What percentage of English learner students were reclassified as fluent English proficient four or five years after kindergarten? Do the results vary by initial Spanish proficiency in kindergarten?
- What percentage of English learner students who were reclassified as fluent English proficient four or five years after kindergarten also demonstrated grade-level readiness in grade 4 or 5 in English language arts and math? Do the results vary by initial Spanish proficiency in kindergarten? How do the rates of grade-level readiness for these students compare with those for all students statewide in the same grades?

continued on the next page

Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Measures

In both studies, the "Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to State" for English learners (ACCESS for ELs) was administered to measure students' English proficiency. ACCESS characterizes student proficiency in four language domains: Listening and Speaking (Oral Language) + Reading and Writing (Literacy). Students can receive a composite score ranging from 1 to 6 on the exam; those receiving an ACCESS composite score of 5 or above are considered English proficient.

Additionally, the New Mexico study also used results from the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey–Revised (WMLS-R) or the pre-Language Assessment Scales to evaluate students' initial Spanish language proficiency and place them into either low, medium, or high proficiency. Grade-level readiness in English language arts and math in grades 4 and 5 was measured using the New Mexico Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (NMPARCC) standardized academic assessments.

What Does the Research Show?

Here, we categorize the findings into four groups: Findings around initial English (and Spanish, in one of the studies) proficiency, findings around time to proficiency, findings around which students were more likely to reach English proficiency, and findings around the relationship between English/Spanish proficiency and other measures of student achievement.

Initial Proficiency: Overall, initial English proficiency was low for most kindergarten ELs in both studies: In Philadelphia, ⅔ of kindergarten ELs knew and used minimal English when they entered school, with almost half placing at the lowest proficiency level. In the New Mexico school districts, more than 80% of students in the 2010 cohort and about half the students in the 2011 cohort entered kindergarten with low English proficiency. In contrast, most of these students had medium or high Spanish proficiency upon kindergarten entry. Notably, students with higher initial Spanish proficiency also had higher initial English proficiency.

Time to Proficiency: In both studies, the majority of kindergarten ELs achieved English proficiency within the examined timeframe. In the Philadelphia study, almost 60% of kindergarten ELs achieved English proficiency within four years of starting school (i.e., by the end of third grade). In the New Mexico study, about 75% of students in the 2010 cohort (59% in the 2011 cohort) attained English proficiency four years after kindergarten (i.e., by grade 4), with over 80% of students attaining English proficiency five years after kindergarten (i.e., by grade 5).

More Likely to be Proficient: The Philadelphia study found that female students, non special education students, and students who spoke Arabic, Chinese, Khmer, or Vietnamese at home rather than Spanish were more likely to be proficient within four years of starting kindergarten. Additionally, students with higher initial English proficiency were more likely to reach proficiency in four years. In the New Mexico study, students with high initial Spanish proficiency were more likely to reach English proficiency four or five years after kindergarten than students with low or medium initial Spanish proficiency; in fact, a majority of high initial Spanish proficiency students in both cohorts were reclassified as fluent English proficient by year 3 after kindergarten (recall that the New Mexico study focused solely on Spanish-speaking ELs).

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Exploring ELs' Time to Proficiency Through Two Research-Practice Partnerships, continued

Proficiency and Other Achievements: The Philadelphia study also examined the breakdown of students' English proficiency scores across Oral Language and Literacy on the ACCESS, noting that more students became proficient in Oral Language than Literacy, with writing proficiency a notable area of struggle. The New Mexico study additionally examined reclassified students' grade-level readiness by grade 4 or 5 in English language arts and math, finding that fewer than 25% achieved grade-level readiness in grade 4 or 5. Regardless of initial Spanish proficiency, students' rates of grade-level readiness were low (and lower than statewide averages for all New Mexico students in these grades), but ELs with high initial Spanish proficiency were more likely to be grade-level ready than ELs with low or medium initial Spanish proficiency.

Policy Implications

Findings from both studies suggest that when it comes to setting proficiency targets, a uniform standard for time to proficiency might not be appropriate, even among English learners entering school districts at the kindergarten level. Given the relationship between initial proficiency in English (in the Philadelphia study) and in Spanish (in the New Mexico study) and time to English proficiency, policymakers may want to consider differentiating proficiency targets by these initial proficiency ratings. Initial English proficiency assessments can also help identify students in need of additional support (i.e., those students with low initial English proficiency ratings). In other cases, assessing a student's proficiency in their home language might also be an early indicator for targeted needs (i.e., students with low proficiency in their home language may require greater support).

Additionally, the Philadelphia study suggests that ELs need targeted support to develop proficiency in writing; the New Mexico study suggests that grade-level readiness in ELA and math remains a challenge even for ELs who have reached proficiency.

How Was the Work Used in Practice?

We asked the RPP teams how the research studies were used by their practice-side partners. Here's what they had to say:

PHILADELPHIA

This study has given the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs baseline data on the amount of time ELs need to become proficient in English. As the district has set a goal for all students to be reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, this information is guiding its work to meet this goal and set appropriate expectations for ELs. Specifically, the data from the report is informing revisions to English Language Development (ELD) curriculum in grades K-3.

NEW MEXICO

The study results were translated into a blog and a video aimed at practitioners to gain a broader audience to research findings from the Regional Educational Laboratories. Also, while working together with the the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) to conduct the study, a number of irregularities arose related to ELs data across districts, such as reclassification status, assessment outcomes in a student's primary language, or language of instruction. NMPED has since worked with school districts to conduct a data audit to understand the reasons for the data irregularities and have provided increased guidance for data collection for ELs so that reliable, consistent data is collected regularly.

Want to Learn More?

PHILADELPHIA STUDY	NEW MEXICO STUDY
REPORT	REPORT
CONTACT MOLLY PILEGGI TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH	CONTACT BRENDA ARELLANO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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