How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?

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Abstract

Noting the continuously debatable issue of the time required for English Language Learners (ELLs) to attain language proficiency, this paper investigates the complexity of the “how long” question and the different variables that are involved in the answer. It evaluates, compares and measures scientifically researched findings against the time limit set by the No Child Left Behind Act of (2001). The paper highlights the findings of a scientifically researched study used by the U.S. Congress in the legislation process of the Act. The paper concludes with a discussion of the contradictions, within the NCLB Act, surrounding the setting of time limits at which federal funding would expire and, as a result, the majority of ELLs would be left behind!
Language is inextricably entwined with our mental life—our perceiving, our remembering, our attending, our comprehending, our thinking—in short, all of our attempts to make sense of our experience in the world…

(Lindfors, 1991, p. 8)

**Background**

One of the most commonly asked questions about the education of language minority students is how long they need special services, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education?

Under the U. S. Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Civil Rights Act in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), local school districts and states have an obligation to provide appropriate services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, but policymakers have long debated setting time limits for students to receive such services.

In February 2001, the Committee on Education and the Workforce of the U.S. Congress held hearings under the title: “Meeting the Needs of Students With Limited English Proficiency.” The committee was trying to answer three questions:

1. **How long** do children with limited English proficiency need to become proficient in English?
2. What approaches are used to teach these LEP students and how long do students remain in language assistance programs?
3. What are the requirements for LEP students that school districts are expected to meet and how are they set forth?


To answer the first and second questions, the committee reviewed available studies on second language learning and interviewed, among other experts in the field, Dr Kenji Hakuta, the main researcher of this study.

However, there is no agreement among educators, administrators and/or politicians involved (both on national and local levels) about the exact meaning of “proficiency” and how it
should be defined or measured, nor there exists a general consensus on the best bilingual educational program that would assist bilingual students attain such proficiency.

On the other hand, and as per the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), federal funding for education is now tied to the annual quantitative assessment of the ELLs’ educational progression over a three-year-period, after which funding is supposed to end. However, most studies in the field concluded that, even at the best conditions, ELLs need 4-7 years of bilingual education before they reach academic language proficiency akin to their native English speaking peers.

Even the U.S. Government’s General Accounting Office (GAO) notes that while conversational language skills may be developed within 2 years, achieving broader academic language proficiency, such as the ability to read or communicate abstract ideas at grade level, may take several years more.

Thus the problem we are facing now is that while it’s generally agreed upon among educators and researchers that academic language proficiency may take from 4-7 years, politicians in Washington feel that “speeding up” the process of language acquisition could be achieved by tying federal funding to the bilingual education schooling time.

Gersten (1999) notes that Secretary of Education Richard Riley’s goal of having every English-language learner proficient in English in three years represents the thinking of many politicians and educators. To their way of thinking, there is no reason why this goal cannot be accomplished, and English language learners have spent too much time in native-language instruction.

**Problem Statement**

Two years into the implementation of the NCLB Act, the question remains: how did the federal government concluded that three years would be enough to attain the required level of language proficiency for “all” ELLs and what happened when this is proved to be generally unrealistic goal, funding is cut off, and English Language Learners are left behind?
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the complexity of the “how long” question and evaluate, compare and measure scientifically researched findings against the time limit set by the NCLB Act.

English Language Learners are set to suffer the most due to cutting funding to bilingual education, be it federal, state or local. Thus, standards and thresholds should not be ideologically influenced and set by politicians and administrators, especially when requiring states and local educational institutions to adapt and implement programs that are “based on scientific research.”

Significance of the Study

This paper relies mainly on a study done at Stanford University, California, by education researchers Kenji Hakuta, Yuko Goto Butler and Daria Witt (2000), titled: “How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?” This study concluded that it takes 4-7 years for ELLs to attain second language proficiency.

Other studies cited in this paper only confirm this generally acceptable finding. Yet, the NCLB Act sets the ceiling for educators and students at No More Than 3 Academic Years! And, while the Act continuously demand that all steps taken by State and Local educational agencies must be “based on scientific research”, it makes no mentioning of the scientific research the Act itself relied upon for its 3-year-period set for ELLs to attain language proficiency or lose funding from the federal government.

Some of the factors that affect the speed by which ELLs attain proficiency are:
- Different Time for Different Area
- Age Factor
- Type of bilingual education program
- Promoting L1
- Amount of exposure to English
- Level of parental support at home
- Classroom, school, and community environments
Camphire, G. (2003) reported on a study of census data released last February underscores the point: Only 16 percent of Hispanic high school graduates earn a four-year college degree by age 29, as compared with 37 percent of whites and 21 percent of African Americans, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. NCLB aims to help change such statistics, but success is far from assured.

**The Study**

“How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?”

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How long does it take LEP students to learn basic oral English skills?
2. How long does it take LEP students to learn academic English skills to no longer be handicapped in their opportunity to learn in instructional settings that do not accommodate to their language needs?
3. How long does it take LEP students to learn academic English skills to no longer be handicapped when they take high-stakes assessment tests

The study reports on data from four different school districts to draw conclusions on how long it takes students to develop oral and academic English proficiency. The 4 school districts are:

1. District A, San Francisco Bay Area
2. District B, San Francisco Bay Area
3. Toronto, Canada
4. North York, Ontario, Canada

The choice of these samples was determined by availability and access, rather than by any systematic intention to compare populations, district policies, or countries. This paper concentrates on the data from District A, San Francisco Bay Area, which is the largest sample and it illustrates clearly the findings of the study.
What is meant by Language Proficiency?

The traditional view of second language (L2) acquisition is a recapitulation of first language (L1) acquisition. The opinions of the general population hold that learning languages is an easy and natural task for young children. They just ‘pick them up,’ as it were.

However, based on all case studies supporting this simplistic view, it seems that the emphasis is on the reported successes in conversational language, in settings different from formal schooling.

As Van Lier (1998) observed:

*All studies speak of formulaic utterances, conversational strategies, and a highly simple code. This simple code is sufficient for everyday social contact, and often gives the impression of amazing conversational fluency in these contexts, but it is not the elaborate, syntactically and lexically complex code of the proficient language user.*

Case studies remind us that linguistic competence is complex, and that second language learners take a significant amount of time to attain mastery, especially for learning complex academic subjects, contrasted with Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, known as BICS.

Educators have thus come to distinguish between: Oral English Proficiency and Academic English Proficiency

Oral English Proficiency is determined through standardized proficiency tests (i.e. Idea Proficiency Test or IPT). On the other hand, and in addition to IPT, District A gives the MacMillan Informal Reading Inventory and a district-developed writing assessment to inform the student redesignation. These are considered by the district personnel to signal academic competitiveness with native English speakers.

Furthermore, Collier (1995a) found that there is an enormous difference between the time it takes for a second language learner to obtain oral fluency, or social language, and academic language. It may take only a short time for oral fluency, but it may take from seven to ten years to become academically fluent, while the English-only student is progressing as well.
The Data

Figure 1. Performance on IPT (Idea Proficiency Test) as a function of grade level.
The sample consisted of 1,872 students in Grades 1-6 who had been in the school
district since Kindergarten, and were classified as LEP in Kindergarten.

Findings:

The data show the mean score in attaining mastery up through Level F of the IPT,
with a score of 1.0 representing full mastery.

As can be seen, by the end of fourth grade, after five full academic years in
school, over 90 percent of the students who had entered Kindergarten as LEP attained
proficiency in English using this measure.

Summarizing the graph, one might say that for most of the students in this school
district who enter as LEP, it takes between 2 to 5 years to acquire oral English.
**Figure 2. Reading and Writing Tests, District A.**
Performance on the MacMillan informal Reading Inventory and the school district’s own writing assessment, as a function of length of residence.

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**Findings:**

In addition to IPT, District A gives the MacMillan Informal Reading Inventory and a district-developed writing assessment to inform the student redesignation from LEP to FEP. These are considered by the district personnel to signal academic competitiveness with native English speakers.

Figure 2 shows the rates at which students, at the different grades, attain criterion on these two measures. As we can see, the majority of the students attain the criterion at the end of 4th grade, with almost 90 percent of the students attaining criterion by the end of 6th grade.
**Findings:**

Figure 3 superimposes the data for writing and reading with those for oral proficiency. In addition, this figure also shows the redesignation rates from LEP to FEP.

The data clearly show that academic English proficiency takes longer to develop than oral English proficiency, and that the range for academic English proficiency development, by these measures, takes between 4 to 7 years.

**Other Studies**

The GAO review (2001) – “Students With Limited English Proficiency” - of existing research yielded three published studies that focused specifically on the length of time required to become proficient in English and reached a specific conclusion about that.

These three studies assessed students in English based programs and found that it may take 4 to 8 years to develop the language skills needed to perform on a par with native English-
speakers in all core academic subject areas (reading, language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics).

Two of these studies were carried out in Canada and one in the United States (table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Measure of proficiency</th>
<th>Length of time needed to reach proficiency levels of native English-speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toronto (Canada) Board of Education a</td>
<td>Grade-level norms on English vocabulary and language competency tests</td>
<td>At least 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax County (Virginia) School District b</td>
<td>Grade-level norms on academic achievement tests in all areas (reading, language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics [given in English])</td>
<td>At least 4 to 8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North York (Canada) Board of Education c</td>
<td>Age-level norms on tests measuring English speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills</td>
<td>At least 6 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b Collier, V.P. (1987) “Age and Rate of Acquisition of Second Language for Academic Purposes”

**No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act requires a Local Educational Agency (LEA) to submit an application to the State Educational Agency (SEA) that describes how the LEA will hold elementary schools and secondary schools accountable for:

(A) meeting the annual measurable achievement objectives;
(B) making adequate yearly progress for LEP students; and
(C) annually measuring the English proficiency of LEP students so that children served by the programs develop proficiency in English while meeting State academic content and student academic achievement standards;

At the same time, the SEA must provide an assurance that:
- The SEA consulted with LEAs, education-related community groups and nonprofit organizations, parents, teachers, school administrators, and researchers, in developing the annual measurable achievement objectives.
- LEAs receiving a subgrant will annually assess in English children who have been in the United States for 3 or more consecutive years. This annual assessment will be made in either reading or language arts.

- LEAs receiving a subgrant will annually assess the English proficiency of all limited English proficient children participating in this program.

The term "immigrant children and youth," who are to be assessed under the NCLB Act, refers to individuals who:

(A) are aged 3 through 21;
(B) were not born in any State; and
(C) have not been attending one or more schools in any one or more States for more than 3 full academic years.

However, some States define an academic year as 9 months, while other States count an academic year as 10 months. If a student has been in different schools in different school districts and even in different States, the number of months that the student has been in school in any one or more States must not add up to a total of more than 3 full academic years.

Thus, while not providing any assistance to the States and/or local educational institutions on the best bilingual program(s) found to accomplish the politicians goals, set in the NCLB, it’s clear that ELLs are not to be serviced under the NCLB beyond the 3 academic years period, whether they attain proficiency or not, No Question Asked! Even if the school failed to adapt and implement an adequate bilingual program for its ELLs, it’s these students who are being punished, and left behind, under the NCLB Act!

**Discussion & Conclusion**

This research paper relies mainly on a study done at Stanford University, California, by education researchers Kenji Hakuta, Yuko Goto Butler and Daria Witt (2000), titled: “How Long Does It Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?” Dr. Hakuta is a leading researcher in the
field who had been reviewed by the Congress on the subject of bilingual education. This study concluded that it takes 4-7 years for ELLs to attain second language proficiency.

Other studies cited in this paper only confirm this generally acceptable finding. Yet, the NCLB Act sets the ceiling for educators and students at No More Than 3 Academic Years! And, while the Act continuously demand that all steps taken by State and Local educational agencies must be “based on scientific research”, it makes no mentioning of the scientific research the Act itself relied upon for its 3-year-period set for ELLs to attain language proficiency or lose funding from the federal government.

The following are some of the factors that affect the speed at which ELLs attain proficiency:

**Different Time for Different Area**

Collier (1987) found in a study of the Fairfax County (Virginia) School District that children took longer to reach grade norms in reading than in other subjects. For example, even among the highest performing subgroup of children (those who arrived in this county between ages 8 and 11), the performance in different subject areas varied widely, averaging 2 years to reach national norms in mathematics, 3 years in language arts, and 5 years or more in reading.

**Age Factor**

A study of students with limited English proficiency attending school in Fairfax County, Virginia, found that students who arrived in this country between ages 8 and 11 needed 5 to 7 years to compete with native speakers in all subject areas, while children who arrived when they were aged 4 to 7 needed 7 to 10 years.

**Type of bilingual education program**

Lindholm, K. (1990) found that the first criteria for success in Two-Way bilingual education programs is: Programs should provide a minimum of four to six years of bilingual instruction to participating students.
Promoting L1

The U.S. GAO reported that while bilingual programs vary in both their goals and length, those programs that promote native-language literacy as well as English-language literacy may take 5 to 7 years to complete.

Other characteristics affecting the speed of a second language acquisition include the amount of exposure students have already had to English; the level of parental support they have at home; and their classroom, school, and community environments. Any of these factors could affect how long students need to catch up with native speakers. It is no secret thus that ELLs in the U.S. are facing great challenges and they sure need to be assisted by all those that have the means to do so, whether locally or nationally.

Camphire, G. (2003) reported on a study of census data released in last February underscores the point: Only 16 percent of Hispanic high school graduates earn a four-year college degree by age 29, as compared with 37 percent of whites and 21 percent of African Americans, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. NCLB aims to help change such statistics, but success is far from assured.
References


Abbreviations:

BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
DOE: Department of Education
ECS: Education Commission of the States
ELL: English Language Learner
ESL: English as a Second Language
FEP: Fluent English Proficiency
GAO: General Accounting Office
IPT: Idea Proficiency Test (Oral Test)
L1: First language
L2: Second Language
LEA: Local Education Agency
LEP: Limited English Proficiency (a.k.a. ELL)
NCE: Normal Curve Equivalent
NCLB: No Child Left Behind
OBEMLA: Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs
SEA: State Education Agency