English Proficiency and the Pandemic: How Texas English Learner Students Fared During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

This study examined levels of English proficiency before and during the COVID -19 pandemic among Texas state law and the Every Student Succeeds Act, English proficiency is measured annually using a statewide assessment, the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), which assesses English learner students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. This study focused on TELPAS scores among students who took the test in 2020/21 and compared those scores with a matched cohort of similar students from 2018/19. The study found that, despite were representative of the overall Texas English learner student population in the years prior to and during the pandemic. The study also found that rates of reclassification from an English learner student to an English proficient student declined between 2017/18 and 2020/21, and trends in the characteristics of reclassified students changed, with lower percentages of students in major urban areas, eligible for the National School Lunch Program, who spoke primarily Spanish at home, and who identified as Hispanic reclassified in 2020/21 than in 2017/18. On average, during the pandemic, English learner students in elementary grades earned meaningfully lower scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS than similar students earned before the pandemic, particularly in speaking. The findings for secondary grades were mixed; middle school students earned lower scores in listening and high school students earned higher scores in speaking. Finally, the study did not find evidence that English learner program models, such as dual language immersion or English as a second language programs, were meaningfully associated with English proficiency in 2020/21. Leaders at the Texas Education Agency and Texas school districts could consider focusing recovery resources on elementary schools and to some degree on middle schools Education Agency may consider studying the effect of program models on language proficiency and the relationship between reclassification, shifting English proficiency levels, and changing reclassification standards.

What We Studied

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted education across the United States. These disruptions were particularly acute for English learner students, who comprise 10 percent of public school students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). One fifth (20 percent) of U.S. English learner students are in Texas, and Texas has the highest concentration of English learner students of any U.S. state (20 percent), with more than 1 million English learner students in 2019/20 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Texas' English learner students are concentrated in large urban districts and districts in the Rio Grande Valley, and 90 percent speak Spanish as their primary language.

English language development relies on opportunities to use English frequently and flexibly in both oral and written modes (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Gámez & Levine, 2013; Saunders et al., 2006). During the early months of the pandemic, many students experienced shorter school days, less interaction with teachers and peers, school building closures, and challenges related to distance learning. These occurrences may have resulted in fewer formal and informal opportunities to cultivate conversational and academic English. In addition, many districts and schools struggled to provide English learner students with the specialized services and instructional supports that are critical for developing English proficiency (Garcia-Arena & D'Souza, 2020). Although districts and schools maintained a range of approaches to English language development, it is unclear whether these approaches supported English language development in the atypical education settings of the pandemic (for example, fully remote synchronous or asynchronous instruction and hybrid instruction).

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National studies of English proficiency among English learner students during the pandemic have yielded mixed findings. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, growth in English language proficiency measured by the ACCESS for ELLs assessment—an English language proficiency assessment used by 41 states but not Texas (WIDA, 2022)—declined across nearly all grades and all four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sahakyan & Cook, 2021). Analyses of a small sample of English learner students from a large-scale national progress monitoring assessment found that English learner students' growth in reading and mathematics was similar to that of non–English learner students as of fall 2020/21 (Renaissance, 2020). However, by winter 2020/21, their growth in reading and mathematics had slowed relative to non–English learner students' growth (Renaissance, 2021).

In March 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, school buildings closed nationwide, including in Texas, and remained closed in most districts for the remainder of the school year, dramatically changing students' learning environments. By October 2020, most states allowed at least some in-school instruction depending on local health metrics (Education Week, 2021). In Texas, districts were required to offer families the choice of in-school or remote learning (Texas Education Agency, 2020). In October 2020, 54 percent of all Texas students received in-school instruction, whereas 46 percent received remote synchronous or asynchronous instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021a). Scores on statewide standardized achievement assessments declined from 2018/19 to 2020/21 across school levels and subject areas for all students (Texas Education Agency, 2021b).

The study addressed four research questions:

1. To what extent is the composition of Texas English learner students who took the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System representative of the enrolled English learner student population in the years spanning the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (between 2017/18 and 2020/21)?

2. What are the rates of reclassification of Texas English learner students and the characteristics of reclassified students in the years spanning the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (between 2017/18 and 2020/21)?

3. To what extent do the English proficiency scores of Texas English learner students in 2020/21 differ from scores of similar students in 2018/19, prior to the pandemic?

4. Is student participation in a particular English learner program model associated with the English proficiency scores of Texas English learner students in 2020/21?

How We Analyzed the Data

The study team used descriptive and correlational analyses to answer the research questions. For research question 1, for each student and district characteristic, the study team calculated the percentage of English learner students in grades 3–12 with that characteristic in the overall English learner student population and in the TELPAS test-taking sample.[1] For research question 2, the study team calculated the annual reclassification rate as the proportion of English learner students continuing in Texas schools from one year to the next who were reclassified in the continuing year, and also compared the characteristics of the English learner student population with the characteristics of the

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[1] Student characteristics included race/ethnicity, eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, participation in special education or gifted/talented programs, and home language. District characteristics included urbanicity and charter status.

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reclassified sample in each study year. For research question 3, the study team used statistical procedures called propensity score matching and regression analysis to compare TELPAS scores of similar students in the 2018/19 and 2020/21 cohorts. The study team conducted matching and analyzed data separately for each school level (elementary, middle, and high school) by TELPAS domain, standardized within grade. The study team estimated a series of regression models predicting TELPAS performance, controlling for cohort; baseline TELPAS performance; and student, school, and district characteristics. For research question 4, the study team used regression models to understand the association between TELPAS performance and English learner program participation in 2020/21.

What We Discovered

This section summarizes the main findings from the study.

English learner students who took the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System were similar to all English learner students in Texas from 2017/18 to 2020/21, although the percentage of students who took the assessment after the onset of the pandemic in 2019/20 was smaller

The percentage of English learner students who took the TELPAS declined after the onset of the pandemic in 2019/20, but student and district characteristics among all English learner students and those who took the TELPAS remained similar during this period. Despite lower test-taking rates in 2019/20 and 2020/21, English learner students who took the TELPAS were similar to all English learner students on observed demographic characteristics in all four years from 2017/18 to 2020/21. Across all characteristics examined, the difference between the sample of English learner students who took the TELPAS and the population of English learner students in that year never exceeded 5 percentage points.

Reclassification rates declined between 2017/18 and 2020/21; among students who were reclassified during the four-year period from 2017/18 to 2020/21, the percentage of students who were from a major urban district, were eligible for the National School Lunch program, spoke primarily Spanish at home, and were Hispanic decreased

The proportion of grades 3–12 English learner students who were reclassified as English proficient declined 7.6 percentage points during the period examined, from 11.8 percent (76,190 students) in 2017/18 to 4.2 percent (30,840 students) in 2020/21. In 2017/18, 21 percent of the English learner students who were reclassified attended a school in a major urban district. By 2020/21, this percentage decreased to 12 percent. In 2017/18, 78 percent of reclassified English learner students were eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 71 percent of reclassified English learner students in 2020/21.

Listening, speaking, and reading scores among English learner students in grades 3–5 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

In 2020/21, English learner students in grades 3–5 had lower scores on all TELPAS domains compared with similar students in 2018/19. The largest differences were for speaking, followed by reading and then listening; all estimated differences were greater than 0.1 standard deviation and statistically significant (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Listening, speaking, and reading scores on the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System among Texas English learner students in grades 3–5 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

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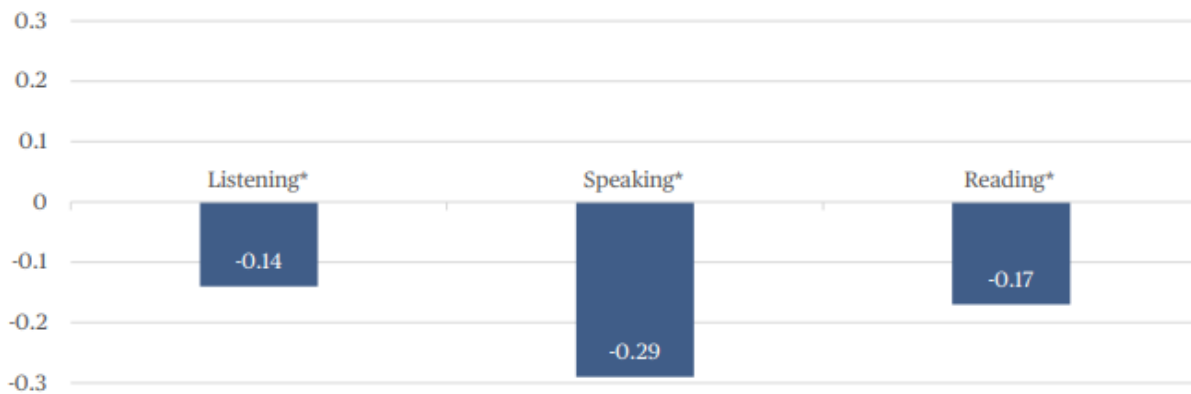
* Denotes a difference of greater than or equal to 0.1 standard deviation, which was considered a meaningful difference.

TELPAS is Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System.

Note: The sample included 354,156 English learner students for the listening domain, 354,156 English learner students for the speaking domain, and 387,808 English learner students for the reading domain. The results for the composite and writing domain are not shown because of high rates of missing data. Regression-adjusted estimates are based on a matched sample of similar students.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Texas Education Agency and the University of Texas Education Research Center.

Listening scores among English learner students in grades 6–8 were lower in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19; speaking scores among English learner students in grades 9–12 were higher in 2020/21 than those of similar students in 2018/19

For English learner students in grades 6–8, estimated differences in TELPAS scores in 2020/21 compared with 2018/19 varied by domain. Similar to grades 3–5 students, grades 6–8 students' listening scores were lower in 2020/21 than in 2018/19. For English learner students in grades 9–12, differences in TELPAS scores in 2020/21 compared with 2018/19 also varied by domain. Grades 9–12 students in 2020/21 had higher scores on the speaking domain than similar students in 2018/19, whereas there was no meaningful difference in their listening or reading scores.

Grade 3–5 students in two-way dual-language immersion and other English learner program models showed no meaningful differences in scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains compared with students in one-way dual-language immersion programs in 2020/21

In 2020/21, English learner student participation in two-way dual-language immersion programs and English as a second language (ESL) content-based programs in grades 3–5 was not associated with meaningfully higher scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS compared with participation in one-way dual-language immersion programs after adjusting for student, school, and district characteristics.[2] Participation in other language programs was not associated with higher or lower TELPAS scores relative to participation in one-way dual-language immersion programs.

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[2] In grades 6–12, there was less variation in participation by program model; with this lack of variation, the study team did not conduct a similar analysis for these grades.

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Policy Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest several opportunities for education leaders in Texas to improve English learner students' English language proficiency and to ensure that reclassification criteria and processes serve the state's goals for its English learner student population. As a reminder, this study was descriptive, so its findings should not be interpreted as causal.

First, leaders at the Texas Education Agency and in Texas districts may consider focusing recovery resources on elementary schools to help improve proficiency. The study found that the largest differences in English proficiency scores in listening, speaking, and reading compared with a prepandemic cohort of similar students were among Texas English learner students in grades 3–5 in 2020/21. This finding suggests the need for targeted investment of recovery resources in the elementary grades, when students are in a critical stage that will determine whether they are reclassified as English proficient before middle school. The percentage of students classified as long-term English learner students in Texas has risen in recent years, with nearly 70 percent of English learner students who started grade 1 in 2014/15 becoming long-term English learner students by grade 6 (Cashiola & Potter, 2021). Remaining classified as an English learner student for six or more years, often referred to as a long-term English learner student (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), is associated with adverse educational outcomes (Olsen, 2010). In contrast, students who are reclassified before they would become long-term English learner students have attained outcomes comparable to those who were never classified as English learner students (de la Torre et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study's findings suggest that investing in supports specifically for listening skills may be valuable for students who were in grades 6–8 at the height of the pandemic, should resources permit.

Second, the Texas Education Agency and Texas districts may consider identifying and supporting the use of strategies to cultivate elementary school English learner students' speaking proficiency, which appears to have stagnated the most during the pandemic. The study found that students in grades 3–5 had lower scores in 2020/21 than similar students in 2018/19 on the listening, speaking, and reading domains of the TELPAS; however, the largest differences were on the speaking domain, indicating that if resources are limited, supporting speaking skills should be prioritized. These skills could be supported through regular opportunities to practice oral language skills using evidence-based approaches to language and literacy development, such as those outlined in the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide *Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School* (Baker et al., 2014). Districts also may access resources designed to help educators implement these evidence-based approaches in the *Professional Learning Communities Facilitator's Guide for the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide* toolkit developed by Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (Dimino et al., 2015).

Third, leaders at the Texas Education Agency may consider studying the effect of English learner program models on language proficiency, particularly related to the effectiveness of two-way dual-language immersion programs. The study found that participation in two-way dual-language immersion and ESL content-based programs was associated with higher scores on the listening, speaking, and reading domains relative to one-way dual-language immersion programs for grade 3–5 students, although these differences were not large enough to be meaningful. Understanding more about these areas could lead to changes in teacher certification policy or policy regarding district requirements for offering certain program models.

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Finally, the findings related to decreases in reclassification rates indicate more research is needed to understand the relationship between reclassification, shifting English language proficiency levels during the pandemic, changes in proficiency assessments, and modified reclassification criteria. The study found a large decline in reclassification rates from 2017/18 to 2018/19 and smaller declines in subsequent years. The study also found that the composition of reclassified students changed: those reclassified in 2020/21 were less likely to be in major urban districts, less likely to be eligible for the National School Lunch program, less likely to be from homes where Spanish was the primary language and less likely to be Hispanic. This changing composition of the group of students who were reclassified points to a need for further research on how reclassification criteria are related to student, school, and district characteristics, how the pandemic may have affected different student groups, and the potential equity implications of changing reclassification criteria.

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