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# Forbidden Language

ENGLISH LEARNERS AND RESTRICTIVE  
LANGUAGE POLICIES

*Edited by Patricia Gándara and Megan Hopkins*

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## The Changing Linguistic Landscape of the United States

*Patricia Gándara and Megan Hopkins*

ONE IN FIVE students in the United States is the child of an immigrant, and most of these students speak a language other than English at home (Capps et al., 2005). Half of these students—about 10% of all students—do not speak English well enough to be considered fluent English speakers (Batalova, 2006). These students, commonly referred to as English learners (ELs), perform at lower levels on virtually every measure from achievement scores to graduation rates than almost any other category of students. And, while the general student population in the United States grew just 2.6% between 1995 and 2005, the EL student population grew 56% (Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2007). Increasingly, then, the academic achievement of English learners is affecting the overall education level of the nation.

Some have argued that the languages spoken by these students are resources that should be nurtured and preserved as students learn English. Others have asserted that since English is the language of the land, students should learn English as rapidly as possible by being immersed in it and that home languages should be kept at home. The debates that have raged over policies for the instruction of English learners have done little to help these students achieve, and they remain among the most vulnerable students in our schools. Given their large and growing presence in American schools, the education of EL students is an increasingly urgent concern.

Since the 1965 change in immigration policy, removing the caps on immigration from specific groups and privileging family unification as the main rationale

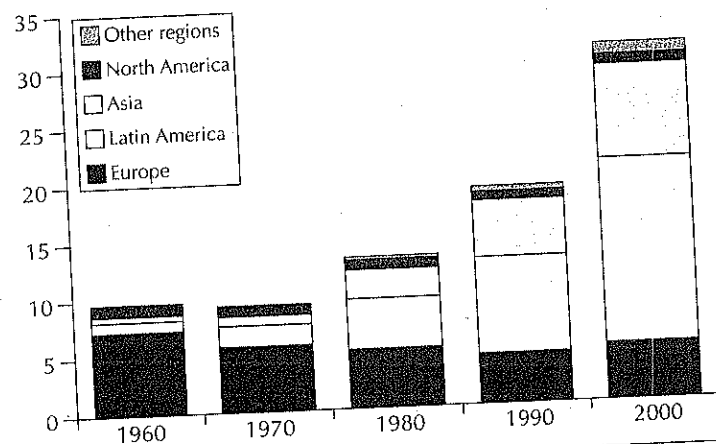
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for gaining legal status, there has been a dramatic increase in immigration, particularly from the Pacific Rim–Asia and Latin America (see Figure 1.1). America's wars abroad have also resulted in influxes of refugees from Southeast Asia and Central America over the last several decades.

Even more dramatic than the shift in overall immigration demographics is the change in public school enrollments. Today, U.S. public schools serve a very different population than they did during the 1960s (see Table 1.1). At that time, about 80% of students were White. Today they are barely more than 50%, and they are a minority of students in all of the nation's large urban districts.

Although virtually all of the languages on the globe are spoken somewhere in the United States, 85% of students speak one of only five. Figure 1.2 shows the most common languages spoken by children in U.S. schools. Given the source of recent immigration, it is no surprise that the top five languages spoken among immigrants are Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Chinese (Cantonese), and Korean. It is notable that more than three-fourths of all English learners speak only one language: Spanish. That so many ELs speak the same language is important because it means that the overwhelming majority of students who do not speak English can be instructed in their native language with relatively little additional burden on the schools.

**Figure 1.1.** Foreign-born U.S. population by world region of birth, 1960–2000 (millions).



Note: The "Other regions" category includes Africa and Oceania.  
Source: Data obtained from the Migration Policy Institute.

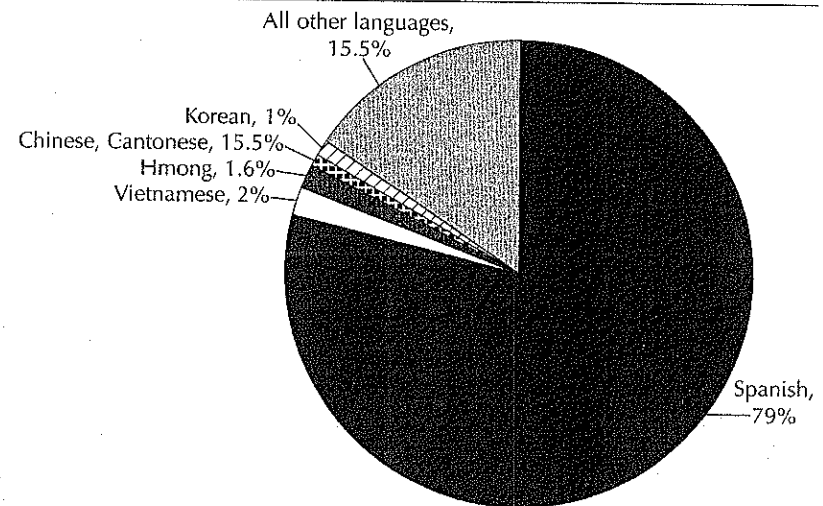
**Table 1.1.** Public school enrollment by race/ethnicity, 1968–2005 (millions).

| Race/Ethnicity | 1968 | 1980 | 1996 | 2005 | Change    |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|-----------|
| White          | 34.7 | 29.2 | 29.1 | 27.7 | -7.0/-20% |
| Black          | 6.3  | 6.4  | 7.7  | 8.4  | +2.1/33%  |
| Latino         | 2    | 3.2  | 6.4  | 9.6  | +7.6/380% |

Source: From *Historic Reversals, Accelerating Desegregation and the Need for New Integration Strategies*, by G. Orfield and C. Lee, 2007. Los Angeles, CA: Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos (www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu). Copyright © 2007 by Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos. Reprinted with permission.

Although the great majority of English learners speak only a few languages, these students present a new challenge in some parts of the country. Until relatively recently, the overwhelming majority of English learners were clustered in traditional immigrant-receiving or formerly Mexican-held territories: the Southwest, California, Florida, New York/New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois. However, in recent years there has been a shift as well in the communities to which new

**Figure 1.2.** Language backgrounds of English learners in the United States, 2000–2001.



Note: Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: Adapted from National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006a.

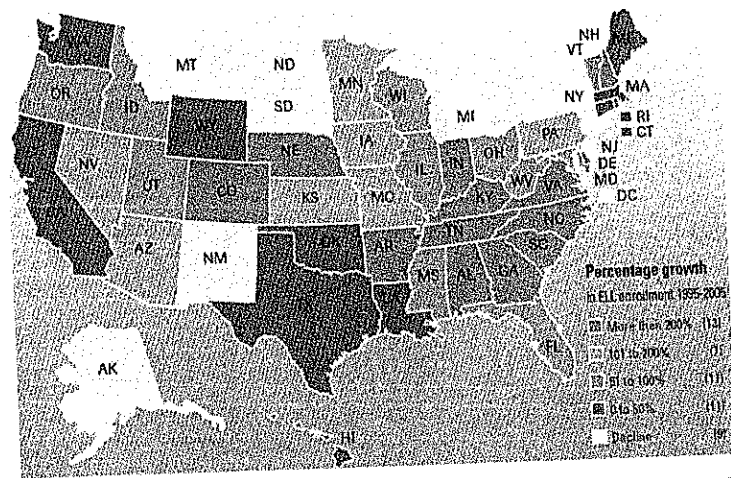
immigrants have migrated. The most rapid growth in English learners is now occurring in some of the southern states—Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee, for example—where poultry processing, furniture and carpet manufacturing, housing construction, and service-sector jobs have drawn them (see Figure 1.3). These jobs are low paying and back breaking, attracting individuals with few other occupational options.

### EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR ENGLISH LEARNER STUDENTS

Although English learners are increasingly dispersed across the nation, they are not equally distributed across schools. Seventy percent of the nation's EL students attend just 10% of the nation's schools (de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). These schools tend to be in urban areas with high concentrations of minority and economically disadvantaged students. English learners thus tend to be highly segregated from English-speaking students, attending schools with very high percentages of students like themselves, where the opportunity to hear good models of English and interact with peers who are native speakers are minimal.

Because the United States is an immigrant nation, English learners have always had a presence in this country. However, the last time that the United States

Figure 1.3. Growth in the U.S. English learner population, 1995–2005.



Source: From Education Week's *Quality Counts*. Reprinted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education and Education Week. Vol. 28, No. 17, January 8, 2009.

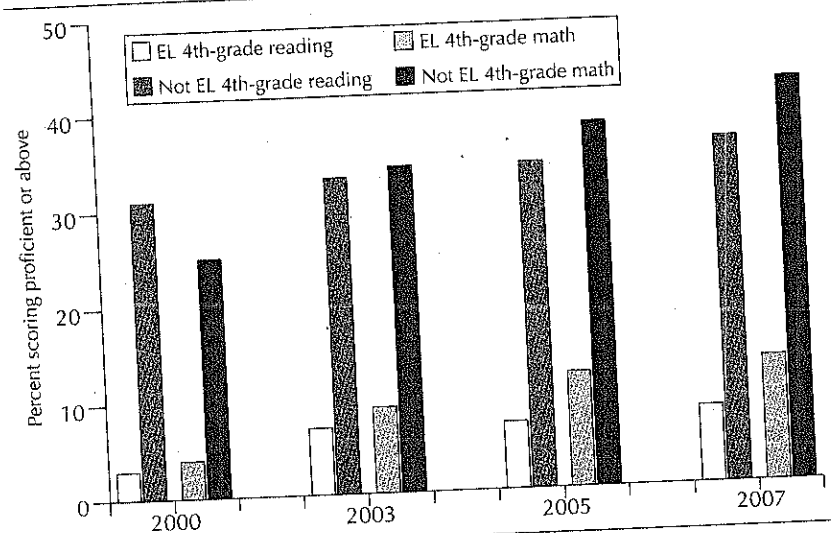
had such a large influx of immigrants speaking non-English languages, at the turn of the 20th century, they entered in a very different economy and a world in which only about 6% of youth actually received a high school diploma (Lemann, 2000). Today, a high school diploma is the bare minimum educational requirement for virtually any kind of stable employment. Yet data show that Latino students who have not fully mastered English by high school have only about a 40% chance at best of completing high school and acquiring a diploma with their agetates (Jammal & Duong, 2007). Data from the Los Angeles schools in 2007 showed that only 27% of EL students who began the ninth grade graduated 4 years later from the district, suggesting that in large urban centers the dropout rate may be considerably higher.

Finishing high school has become an even more daunting task in recent years with the advent of high school exit exams. To date, 23 states require students to pass exit exams in order to graduate from high school (Cech, 2009). These high-stakes exams prevent EL students who have successfully completed all high school coursework, but cannot pass the English-only test, from getting a diploma. Even completing the required coursework is an obstacle for many EL students, because they spend so much of their high school careers in classes learning English instead of in subject-area classes (Center on Education Policy, 2006). A few states allow students to take exit exams in some subject areas in their native languages; however, students must still pass the English language arts exam to receive their diplomas. There are thus large gaps in high school exit exam pass rates between EL students and all other students. In California, for example, while 74% of non-EL students passed the math exit exam on the first try in 2004, only 49% of EL students passed on the first try. Similarly, 75% of non-EL students passed the reading exam on the first try, while only 39% of ELs passed. These large gaps exist for every state that requires an exit exam (Center on Education Policy, 2006).

English learner students struggle in school more than any other group of students except those who have been identified for special education. From the time they enter school at kindergarten until they are in high school, *if* they continue on to high school, they fall far behind other children on virtually all academic measures. Figures 1.4 and 1.5 show the large and persistent gaps between EL students and their non-EL counterparts in math and reading at both fourth and eighth grades.

The disastrously low academic achievement of these students has, in recent years, made them a focus of attention for education reformers and a convenient object of attention for some individuals who have used their plight to push English-only instructional policies in the states. One argument that has been used is that if these students are denied instruction in their native language, they will be forced to abandon "the crutch" of native language, and learn English more rapidly. Further, although a significant body of research refutes the assertion,

**Figure 1.4.** National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for English learners versus non-English learners in fourth-grade, 2000–2007.

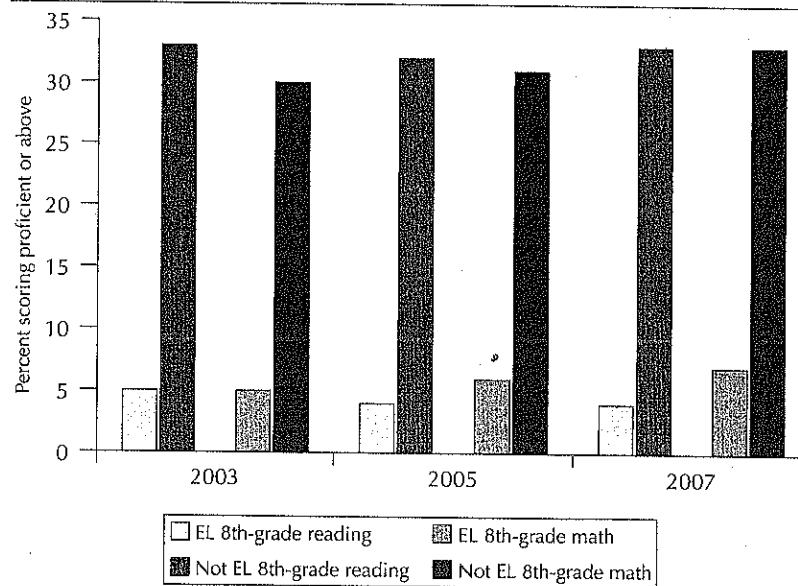


Source: Data compiled from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2008.

this more rapid transition to English is then supposed to result in better academic achievement. Three states—California, Arizona, and Massachusetts—passed ballot initiatives based on these arguments. However, as more evidence has mounted that these state referenda have not been the panacea for English learners that they were promised to be, more recently two states—Colorado and Oregon—have rejected such initiatives.

Nonetheless, in a sagging economy, the issues of immigration and the children of immigration are politically volatile, and these students often find themselves used as political pawns. For example, a growing problem exists for young people who were brought to this country by immigrant parents at very young ages, often before they were even cognizant of their birthplace, and find themselves ineligible for higher education (because they must pay extremely high foreign-student fees and/or are ineligible for any student financial aid) even though they have excelled academically and have never known another country or sometimes even another language. Being anti-immigrant and in favor of English-only policies wins votes in many economically battered areas, and so these young people are often denied access to postsecondary education and told to “go home” when in reality they have never known another home. It is important to point out, how-

**Figure 1.5.** National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for English learners versus non-English learners in eighth-grade, 2003–2007.



Source: Data compiled from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2008.

ever, that upwards of 80% of English learners in U.S. schools were actually born in the United States and are U.S. citizens with all the rights and privileges of any other U.S. citizen. And, among the far fewer students who lack proper documentation, even they are guaranteed the same K–12 education as native-born students. In 1982, the Supreme Court, in the case *Plyler v. Doe*, established that undocumented students brought to this country by their parents are eligible for full access to K–12 schooling in the United States.

### BECOMING AND UN-BECOMING AN ENGLISH LEARNER

The issues of how students are deemed English learners and how they are judged to have learned sufficient English to be mainstreamed into regular school classes are intimately tied to the controversies surrounding language of instruction and the effectiveness of different approaches to instructing English learners. One reason that policies that simply immerse students in English do not always yield the hoped-for results is that learning English turns out to be much more complicated

than it seems. Most non-native speakers learn to communicate in English relatively rapidly, especially in school settings where there are many English speakers. However, simply being able to communicate basic information or needs in English does not prepare students to excel in school, and most schools require that students achieve a proficiency in the language, and often in core subject-matter knowledge, that is considerably more extensive than basic communication.

To excel, or even survive academically in school, students must be able to understand a specialized vocabulary (e.g., words such as *summarize* or *analyze* are not generally used on the playground), comprehend complex written text, write essays that are well structured and coherent, make oral presentations on academic topics, and especially pass examinations that are written in a form of English that is often meant to challenge the language skills of native English speakers. If they cannot do these things, they will fail. Moreover, if they have missed out on lessons in history, social studies, science, and math because they could not understand them in English, they are far behind their peers in knowing the material that is tested and cannot hope to pass grade-level exams. Without significant academic intervention, and more time to acquire all that has been missed, these children then fall farther and farther behind as the years go by.

All states have developed tests of English language proficiency that measure English learners' progress in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English, as a requirement of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Zehr, 2009). These English-language-proficiency (ELP) assessments are used in every state and the District of Columbia as screening tests to help determine whether or not a student receives the designation "English learner." The use of the state's ELP assessment as the sole criterion to determine program placement can be problematic, however, when a single cutoff score decides whether or not a student should be transitioned out of an EL program. For example, if the cutoff score is 500, and students score 499, they are still designated English learners; however, if they score 501, they are redesignated fluent English proficient (R-FEP). A 2-point difference could make all the difference for children in terms of the language and academic support they receive (if transitioned out of the EL program too early, adequate supports may not be in place for students to succeed in a mainstream classroom). Of course, students do not magically convert from being limited in English to being fluent English speakers overnight. Becoming a fluent English speaker is a process that occurs over a period of time and requires different types and levels of support throughout that period.

Almost all states include a home-language survey as well to determine the languages students speak at home (EPE Research Center, 2009). These surveys are normally used to trigger a more elaborate evaluation of language proficiency if warranted. Other measures include teacher judgment, state or local tests (not the ELP assessment), parent or student interviews, and student grades. There is

little uniformity, however, across states or even school districts in how English learners are designated, how their progress is measured, or how they are redesignated as English speakers. When the support they are provided hinges on these measures, such discrepancies can have serious repercussions for EL students. Thus, there are substantial differences across the states in the students that are identified as English learners and in the services that are provided for them.

## TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

The success of English learner students depends on the support they receive in learning English as well as in learning their academic subjects. Providing this support to students is by no means easy, as teachers of ELs must essentially do double the work (e.g., teaching academic English and science at the same time) and must be checking for understanding, often without being able to communicate with students. Most teachers have not been adequately trained to address these complex demands. English learners are more likely than any other group of students to be taught by a teacher who lacks appropriate teaching credentials (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Rumberger, 2008). As of 2000, 41% of U.S. teachers had taught English learner students, but only 13% had received any specialized training on how to teach them (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). According to a 2003 national survey (Zehler et al., 2003), only 5% of teachers of EL students nationwide had a bilingual certification.

The need for certified teachers to teach English learners is acute and continues to grow, particularly in states and locales that for the first time are experiencing the presence of EL populations. As demographics continue to shift, states and school districts must grapple with how best to provide programs for EL students and how to train teachers who may have never before worked with this population. Table 1.2 shows the current certified teacher-EL student ratio in Title III language-instruction programs (which includes bilingual and English-only instructional programs) and the percent of additional certified teachers needed for Title III in the next 5 years for states with the fastest-growing EL populations and for states with the densest EL student populations.

The numbers in the table show the tremendous challenge some states face in finding teachers to serve their EL populations. For example, in Tennessee, a state with one of the fastest-growing EL student populations, the current student-certified teacher ratio is respectable, at 1:27; however, due to the growing numbers of EL students, the state projects needing 2.5 times the current number of EL certified teachers in the next 5 years. In Nevada, a state with one of the densest populations of EL students, the student-certified teacher ratio is abysmal at 1:128, with an additional 27.4% of teachers needed over the next 5 years.

**Table 1.2.** Certified teacher-to-student ratio and teachers needed for EL students, 2006–2007.

|  | EL Students per<br>Certified Title III<br>Teacher (n) | Additional Certified Teachers<br>Needed for Title III in Next 5 Years,<br>as Share of Current Teachers (%) |
|--|---|--|
| Fastest-growing EL population (more than 200%) |   |  |
| Alabama  | 86  | 10.2   |
| Arkansas                                       | 19  | 66.5   |
| Colorado                                       | 17  | 48.4   |
| Georgia  | 31  | 50.1   |
| Indiana  | 26  | 62.0   |
| Kentucky                                       | 3   | 6.3  |
| Nebraska                                       | 43  | 34.7   |
| North Carolina                                 | 20  | 25.2   |
| South Carolina                                 | 55  | 60.9   |
| Tennessee                                      | 27  | 150.0  |
| Virginia                                       | 49  | 64.8   |
| Densest population of EL students              |   |  |
| Arizona  | 16  | 14.3   |
| California                                     | —   | —  |
| Nevada   | 128   | 27.4   |
| New Mexico                                     | 7   | 11.3   |
| Oregon   | 466   | —  |
| Texas  | 31  | 58.3   |
| Utah   | 28  | 199.8  |

Note: Colorado has one of the fastest-growing and the densest EL student populations.  
Sources: From National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2006b; Viadero, 2009.

While there is considerable consensus that many more well-prepared teachers are needed, a recent survey of 5,300 educators in California demonstrated that many of the teachers of English learners in that state felt unprepared to meet the challenge of teaching them, even when they held specialized credentials (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). The underpreparation of teachers results in part because there is not a strong consensus of what constitutes a “highly qualified” or even reasonably prepared teacher for EL students. Of course, much depends on the goals of the program in which they are teaching—a bilingual or dual-language classroom requires skills above and beyond what would be required

for an English as Second Language (ESL) class. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2005) argue that all teachers of EL students need extensive knowledge of first- and second-language acquisition as well as how to explicitly teach about language. Others have argued for a host of additional competencies, including an understanding of how to plan, implement, and manage instruction aligned with English Language Development standards and the resources needed to execute effective instruction; a knowledge of appropriate assessments for EL students and an attentiveness to the biases embedded in some standardized tests; an awareness of the history of EL issues and the motivation to advocate on students’ behalf; and a sensitivity to cultural differences and a willingness to incorporate students’ culture into the curriculum (Télez & Waxman, 2006). Of course, teachers of English learners should also be responsive to the diversity within the EL population; there is no “one size fits all” model for teaching such a diverse group of students (García & Stritikus, 2006). At a minimum, however, teachers must feel that they are prepared and should be able to demonstrate success with these students, things that many of the California teachers surveyed did not believe was true for them.

Although researchers have outlined some of the critical competencies for teachers of English learners, there is still much to be learned about what kind of teacher is best suited to work with these students and how best to recruit and retain these teachers (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006). It has been suggested that teachers who are from similar communities or who share similar backgrounds with EL students may be best suited to understand the needs of this population and the most likely to continue teaching in these communities. Yet the teaching force remains largely White and middle-class, suggesting the need to expand the teacher pool by recruiting and providing incentives for teacher candidates from underrepresented communities. Moreover, as the nation diversifies, teachers will increasingly be required to meet the needs of many different types of students in their classrooms, and there is no evidence that simply being from one minority group necessarily increases teachers’ sensitivity to all others.

Aside from needing adequate preparation and continuing support, teachers of ELs are more likely than other teachers to report that they do not have adequate school facilities or educational materials, which only adds to the difficulty of their job (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006). Given the large and increasing number of ELs in U.S. public schools, it behooves the educational community—and the nation as a whole—to improve the educational environments and opportunities for these students and their teachers. Failing to do so will put the entire education system at risk. For example, in California, with one-third of the nation’s English learners, the overwhelming majority of schools in Program Improvement status for failing to meet No Child Left Behind benchmarks are schools with high proportions of English learners. As the percent of students required to meet academic proficiency under NCLB continues to rise, all schools with significant numbers of EL students will face this fate.

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