

How Long Does It Take?

Lessons from EQAO Data on English Language Learners in Ontario Schools

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Who Are English Language Learners?

English language learners (ELLs) are students in English-language schools whose first language is other than English. They may be Canadian-born, or newcomers from other countries. They may speak one of more than 100 languages, including several Aboriginal languages, or an English-related Creole language such as Jamaican Creole or West African Krio.

According to information gathered in 2005 and 2006 from children involved in EQAO assessments in Grades 3 and 6:

- About 20% of Ontario's students in English-language elementary schools are English language learners (i.e., their first language is other than English).
- This is a much larger group than the group identified as “ESL/ELD learners.”
- 58% of the identified ELLs were born in Canada.

These children enter a new linguistic and cultural environment when they start school in Ontario . Since literacy instruction in Ontario's English-language schools is in English, these children require particular attention, consideration, and support in order to overcome the mismatch between their first language (L1) and the language of instruction. However, they do not all receive support from an ESL/ELD teacher. In schools where there is an ESL/ELD teacher, support is usually provided only for the first year or two, and mostly to newcomers rather than Canadian-born children.

This article analyzes EQAO data in order to determine how long it takes for ELLs to catch up to their age peers on literacy assessments in English. The article concludes with a 10-point action plan for accelerated language acquisition, with a focus on underperforming groups.

How long does it take for ELLs to catch up to their age peers on literacy assessments in English?

This question has to be examined for two distinct groups of English language learners: those who have arrived from other countries, and those who were born in Canada . There are three pieces of information gathered by EQAO that provide us with insights about the progress of both groups:

- Language background: EQAO identifies children with L1 other than English (but not by language)
- Country of Birth: EQAO identifies children born outside Canada (but not by country of birth)
- Length of time in Canada: EQAO identifies children who have been in Canada for varying lengths of time:
 - < 1 year
 - > 1 year but <2 years
 - > 2 years but <3 years
 - > 3 years but <5 years
 - >5 years

Because the criteria for identifying ELLs have changed several times, we have only two years of comparable data to draw on. The following information is disaggregated from detailed EQAO data for 2005 and 2006 that were made available to the Research Team in the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. The Method 1 figures are used: i.e., all students who were in Grades 3 and 6 in Spring 2005 and 2006, whether they actually took the test or not. It should be remembered that many newcomers from other countries are exempted from EQAO assessments in their first year or two in Canada .

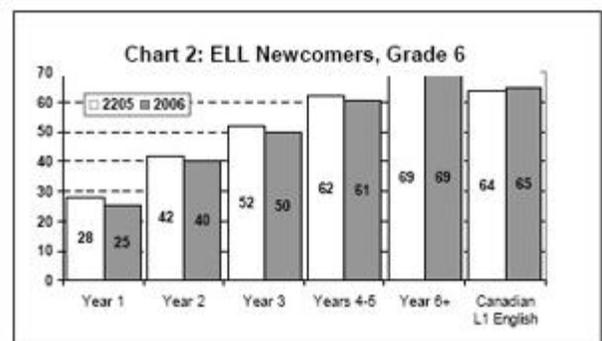
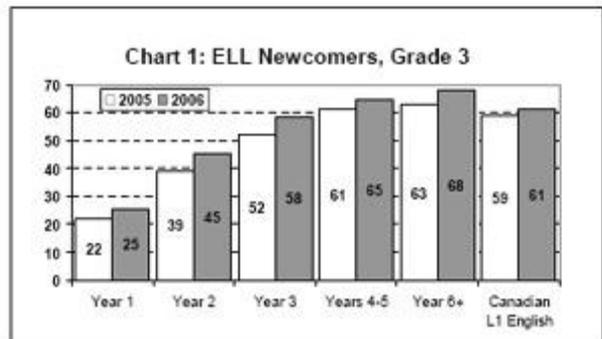
English Language Learners from Other Countries

Charts 1 and 2 show the percentage of newcomer ELLs, disaggregated into cohorts according to length of time in Canada , who achieve the provincial standard in Reading. Their performance is compared with that of Canadian-born English-speaking children.

These data must be interpreted cautiously. It is not possible to establish a trend from two years of data. Also, some of the cohorts comprise only a few hundred students.

Nevertheless, we can say that the data are consistent with research from Canada and the United States : it takes five or more years for ELLs to catch up to their English-speaking peers in English language and literacy skills. (Cummins, 2000; Garcia, 2000; Klesmer,1994; Thomas and Collier, 2002).

The data on newcomer ELLs also suggest that immigrant children eventually outperform their Canadian-born peers. This is a surprise to many



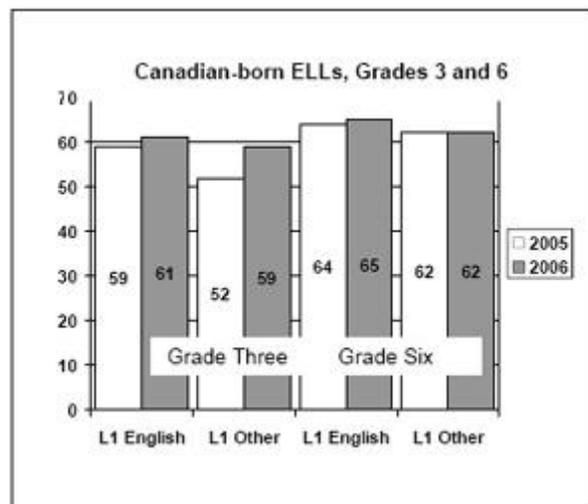
teachers, but is consistent with Canadian data in a recent international study on the academic achievement of immigrant children (OECD, 2006). Another surprise for many is that students who begin learning English later eventually do better than their younger siblings— even though they have more English to catch up on.

These data seem to show that, given sufficient time, immigrant children do well in our schools.... So what's the problem? Why should we worry about ELLs in Ontario schools? Unfortunately, the aggregate data on immigrant children do not show the great variability among children of different language backgrounds and from different immigrant communities. While some groups of ELLs are doing astonishingly well, others are in jeopardy. This problem will be explored further in “key Insights and Questions” later in this article.

Canadian-born English Language Learners

Chart 3 shows the performance of Canadian-born English language learners compared with the performance of Canadian-born English speakers.

Most of these children have had all their schooling in Ontario . By Grade3, most Canadian-born ELLs have had almost five years of immersion in an English-language school environment; by Grade 6, they have had almost eight years of English-language schooling in Ontario . Nevertheless, these data show that Canadian-born ELLs have not caught up by Grade 6. According to a Statistics Canada study, Canadian-born children of immigrants catch up by Grade 8 and then go on to do somewhat better than the Canadian average (Worswick 2001, 2004). However, neither the Statistics Canada study nor the EQAO data show whether students of some language backgrounds perform better than others. This question will be explored further in “Key Insights and Questions,” below.



Key Insights and Questions

In the aggregate, English language learners seem to be doing very well, and given time catch up to and even overtake their English-speaking Canadian-born peers. Can this be attributed to the positive effects of being bilingual? Learning a second language for and at school is an accelerated process compared with the learning of a first language. For example, children who begin learning English at the age of

eight are eight years behind their age peers who have been learning English since birth. Meanwhile their peers continue to expand their own language skills. The child who begins learning at the age of eight has to learn English twice as fast as her English-speaking peers in order to catch up within five years, at the age of 13. Does this accelerated learning process have a positive effect on learning strategies and overall cognitive development?

If English language learners do well as a group, and given time catch up to and even overtake their English-speaking Canadian-born peers, why should we be concerned about this group of students? The fact is that while some students do astonishingly well within their first year or two in Canada, others seem never to catch up. According to a recent study in the Toronto District School Board, students from some regions of the world, and from some language backgrounds, experience significantly more academic difficulty than others, and eventually drop out in much higher numbers (Brown, 2006). For example, students from the English-speaking Caribbean, students from East Africa, and students from Latin America, as well as Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking students (immigrant and Canadian-born) have a dropout rate of 30-40% or more compared with about 20% for Canadian-born English-speaking students and about 10% for students from Eastern Europe and East Asia. From this we can infer that ELLs from some linguistic communities and some groups of immigrant students are not deriving equal benefit from their schools at the present time.

It takes more than 5 years for ELLs, both immigrant and Canadian-born, to catch up to their English speaking peers, but at the present time we can't say exactly how long, and we can't say what kind or how much ESL or ELD support they have received. Some children do reach the provincial standard in a much shorter period— about 25% of newcomer ELLs achieve level 3 or 4 on provincial testing within their first year in Canada. What factors contribute to the high performance of those students who achieve the provincial standard in less than 5 years? What factors may be holding other students back? For example:

- How much and what kind of ESL/ELD support have ELLs received?
- Do schools identify Canadian-born children whose first language is other than English as ELLs, and do these ELLs receive adequate ESL support?
- What about children who arrive as newcomers from countries where education has not been consistently available— do these students receive the intensive long-term support for second language acquisition and academic development that they need in order to catch up to peers who have had age-appropriate opportunities for schooling?
- What exposure to English have children had before arriving in an Ontario school— in Ontario, or in other countries?
- What role does parental education play? As a group immigrant parents are better educated than Canadian-born adults, even though there is great variation within the immigrant group
- What role do teacher expectations play? Subconsciously or otherwise, some teachers may have higher expectations of students from some linguistic and ethnocultural backgrounds than others.
- What role does the first language play? Studies have shown that children who continue to develop age-appropriate levels of literacy in their own language while learning English do better in literacy development in English, and in overall academic

achievement, than ELLs who abandon their first language— and better than monolingual English-speaking children as well (CILT, 2007; Cummins, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2002). Most ELLs are at age-appropriate levels of development in their first language when they enrol in an Ontario school. What opportunities do they have to continue to develop in their own language while they are acquiring English? Is a great resource being squandered? Can we do more to ensure that all ELLs have a rich foundation in L1 that will support their literacy development in English and their overall cognitive development?

An Action Plan for Schools and School Boards

English language learners take five or more years to catch up to age peers in English language and literacy skills. Some achieve this in a much shorter period of time, while others take much longer. The TDSB study suggests that others never do, and that students from certain countries of origin or language backgrounds are at much higher risk than others. Some immigrant groups and some linguistic communities are not deriving equal benefit from their schools, and this is inequitable.

The following 10-point action outlines the steps that schools and school districts can take towards addressing this inequity.

1. Identify all English language learners

It is important to identify ELLs who were born in Canada as well as those who are newcomers. At registration, make sure to record:

- the child's first language (the language the child first learned as an infant);
- country of birth;
- date of arrival if born outside Canada

You will get more accurate information if you explain the purpose of the questions and if you can provide interpreters to help with the registration process.

2. Assess learning needs

The Ministry resource document *Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English language learners in every classroom* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) provides general suggestions on initial assessment. In elementary schools, this is best done informally over a period of several weeks rather than all on one day.

- Assessment tasks must be appropriate to students whose first language is other than English. Data from assessments designed for English-speaking children will reveal only that the student is not yet performing at the same level of English-proficient peers. This is only to be expected, since the ELL is still learning English; moreover, the results cannot help the teacher to determine if the student is learning English at a rate similar to that of other English language

learners. It is more helpful to determine each student's starting point in English, using language performance descriptors that are appropriate for children who are still in the process of learning English as a second or additional language, and continue using these descriptors to assess performance and growth over time. Such descriptors can be found in the Ministry document *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1–8 English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). As well, *Steps to English Proficiency*, a new Ministry resource for Ontario teachers, is now in development. This document will provide developmental continua and assessment tools for use with ELLs. This resource will be piloted in the fall of 2007.

- Some newcomers have had interrupted or inconsistent schooling: if that is the case, use the descriptors for English Literacy Development (ELD). These students will need more intensive support over a longer period of time than students who arrive with age-appropriate levels of literacy in their own language.
- Teachers need information about the language background and needs of each student in the class.

3. Provide a high quality program of second language instruction

- A school-based teacher or a resource teacher designated by the Board should be responsible for providing direct instruction to ELLs and/or working with other teachers to ensure that all ELLs receive the support that they need.
- Designated ESL/ELD teachers should be appropriately qualified and skilled. These individuals should also be able to play a leadership role and serve as a coach to classroom teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms.
- ESL/ELD teachers may be assigned to one school or they may work as itinerant teachers in several schools, depending on the geographic distribution of ELLs.
- The ESL/ELD program should be linked to the content of the mainstream curriculum. For this reason it is better to provide differentiated instruction to groups of ELLs from the same grade or division rather than by level of proficiency in English. Also, research has shown that interaction among students of varying levels of language proficiency enhances language acquisition.
- The timetable should be designed so that ELLs from the same grade or division can work with an ESL/ELD teacher, or within the mainstream class on highly differentiated tasks, during the literacy block and during Social Studies time. These are the subjects in which ELLs are least likely to benefit from immersion in the mainstream curriculum.

4. Monitor progress

- Learning English for and at school is a long-term process that cannot be left to chance. It is important to document each student's development in English over a period of several years.
- The language performance descriptors in *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1–8 English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001) or, when available, the language assessment continua and tracking forms in *Steps to English Proficiency* can be used to track the progress of individual students.

- Monitoring should be a shared responsibility between designated ESL/ELD staff and the classroom teacher.
- It is important to track students over a multi-year period and ensure that updated information is passed on when students move into a higher grade or when they change schools.

5. Prepare all teachers

- Teaching in Ontario presents wonderful opportunities for cultural and enrichment for students, teachers, and community members. However, teaching in situations of linguistic and ethnocultural diversity may present special challenges for teachers, most of whom have not received specific training or preparation for their role.
- All teachers need to be prepared to support ELLs so that they can improve their English and experience success with the Ontario curriculum. Most ELLs spend significant portions of each day in the mainstream program. Integration is desirable: even students who are new to Canada and/or new to English need to spend some part of each day interacting with their English speaking peers in mainstream classrooms. Also, few ELLs in Ontario 's elementary schools receive direct support from an ESL/ELD teacher after their first year or two; indeed, many never see an ESL/ELD teacher at all.
- The Ministry has provided a number of resources to help teachers become more responsive to the needs of these students. For example, *Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English language learners in every classroom* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) provides guidance and examples for supporting English language learners. A webcast featuring Dr. Jim Cummins, *Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Ontario* (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2005), and the *Inspire* article “Sharing Space with English and French” (Coelho, 2006) provide practical suggestions and examples of how to make an asset of students' languages in the classroom. As well, another article in this issue of *Inspire*, “Differentiated Instruction for English Language Learners” outlines some effective strategies for ELLs at various stages of development in English. Additional resources are in development.
- Schools and school boards need to ensure that all school and board plans and staff development programs include a focus on adapting curriculum and instruction for ELLs.

6. Provide an inclusive learning environment

- All aspects of the school environment—the classroom learning materials, the perspectives taken and the examples used in various curriculum areas, the books and other material in school and classroom libraries, the student work on display, classroom pedagogy, the ethnocultural composition of the staff, guest speakers or performers, and communication with parents — should draw on and validate the linguistic and ethnocultural diversity in the community.
- Even schools that serve predominantly white English-speaking communities need to help all students and parents to value diversity and interact effectively with people whose background is different from their own, because multilingualism and multiculturalism are realities in Canadian society and in the world.

7. Work with parents

- Immigrant parents often work long hours which make it difficult to attend school events. As well, they may feel that their own knowledge of English, and their understanding of the school system, may be inadequate to the task of talking with teachers or helping with school activities.
- Schools need to reach out to these parents through specific kinds of events or by providing specific kinds of supports, such as interpreters and school ambassadors.
- See “Put Out the Welcome Mat” and “Make Connections: Parents and Community” in *Many Roots, Many Voices* for suggestions on how to enhance parent participation in a linguistically and culturally diverse community.
- The resources developed by Settlement Workers in Schools also provide a variety of orientation resources for newcomer parents in various community languages. For more information see www.settlement.org/edguide.

8. Make an asset of students' languages

- Research has shown that children who maintain and continue to develop in their own language reach higher levels of literacy and academic achievement than children who begin to lose their first language once they start school (CILT, 2007; Cummins, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2002). This information must be shared with students and parents. School staff should encourage parents to enrol their children in International Languages programs (often referred to as Heritage Languages) where their children can continue to develop literacy skills in their first language. These classes are usually offered through Continuing Education Departments in school boards, on weekends or in the evening.
- School administrators and teachers can demonstrate their support for these programs, and help bring students' linguistic worlds closer together, by visiting a class or by working on some joint projects with Heritage Languages teachers.
- The webcast *Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Ontario* (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2005) and the *Inspire* article “Sharing Space with English and French” (Coelho, 2006) provide some practical suggestions and examples of how to make an asset of students' languages in the classroom.

9. Identify underperforming groups

- Responsible schools need disaggregated information in order to identify underserved groups of students and provide more appropriate instruction for them—including, but not limited to, ESL and ELD support.
- Analysis of EQAO and other assessment data can help to identify patterns of low performance among specific group such as students from refugee-producing countries or students from specific countries or language backgrounds.
- It is important not to rely only on EQAO data. At the present time EQAO does not disaggregate data by country of origin or language background. However, schools know who their students are and can do their own disaggregation by country of birth and/or language background.

- The TDSB study (Brown, 2006) provides a model of how to identify students of various backgrounds at the Board level and disaggregate data in order to analyze and compare patterns of achievement among specific groups.

10. Share the information responsibly

- Data on underperforming groups must be used within the context of school improvement. The data may reveal uncomfortable truths, such as that the school is not yet serving all groups of students equally well, and it's important to present this information carefully. It's not that these students can't learn; it is the school that has to learn how to serve them better.
- The data should be shared with teachers, and with community groups in their own language if possible, with an emphasis on school improvement. Invite dialogue and suggestions on how the school can change practice to improve performance among underperforming groups.
- Appropriate interventions and supports for underachieving/underserved groups can accelerate their acquisition of English language and literacy skills and enable them to reach the same high standards that are expected for all Ontario students.
- Progress should be reported regularly to all members of the school community and every indicator of improvement should be celebrated.

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