When Change is the Only Consistency:  
The Case of Long-Term English Language Learners in Secondary Schools

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Under Review for Publication

Abstract

This article presents qualitative research findings about the characteristics and prior schooling experiences of long-term English language learners (LTELLs), who have been in U.S. schools for seven years or more and about whom there is little empirical research in spite of their growing numbers in secondary schools. Findings are based on in-depth interviews with 29 LTELLs gathered over a six-month period in three New York City high schools, interviews with the students’ teachers and administrators, and analyses of academic performance data.

LTELLs are orally bilingual, yet have limited literacy skills in either their native language or English, which results in poor overall academic performance. We identify three main groups of LTELLs: 1) vaivén students, who have moved back and forth between the U.S. and their family’s country of origin, 2) students with inconsistent U.S. schooling, who have shifted between bilingual education, ESL programs, and mainstream classrooms with no language support programming, and 3) transitioning students, who simply require additional time to acquire English. Inconsistency in school and program enrollment prevents students from developing literacy skills in either of the languages they speak, and is likely to lengthen the amount of time it will take a student to acquire English.

Suggested Keywords: English language learners, long-term English language learners, Generation 1.5, secondary school, literacy
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English language learners (ELLs) are currently the fastest growing student population in the United States, and the greatest growth within the ELL population has occurred at the secondary level (Kindler, 2002). Even so, there is little research about secondary ELLs, who have been deemed “overlooked and underserved” because research about English learners in the U.S. typically focuses on elementary students (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Yet there is an urgent need for greater attention to ELLs in high school, as these students are disproportionately represented in national rates of dropout and grade retention in the U.S. (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2000; Menken, 2008; Ruiz de Velasco, 2005; Valencia & Villarreal, 2005). English language learners who take longer than average to exit their ELL status are even more likely than their peers to experience educational failure.

These students, known as “Long-Term ELLs,” are defined in this study as students who have attended school in the United States for seven years or more, and continue to require language support services in school. Though research has shown that most ELLs will acquire sufficient academic English to enter a mainstream classroom within five to seven years (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997), this article focuses on secondary students who require longer than average. While there are significant numbers of Long-Term English Language Learners (L.TELLs) in the New York City public schools, comprising at least 12.8% of all English language learners (New York City Department of Education, 2007)\(^1\), very little research has been conducted about them; thus in

\(^1\) It is worth noting that this estimate is likely low, as it is based on number of years in New York City schools and does not include years spent in schools elsewhere within the US.
this article we bring into the spotlight a group of secondary ELLs who have been particularly overlooked.

As detailed in this manuscript, an identifying characteristic of LTELLs is that they are orally bilingual, yet have limited literacy skills in English and their native language. The dilemma for these students is that the typical high school English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education program is not designed to meet their specific needs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). As we argue below, the needs of long-term English language learners in high school are different from those of other ELLs, and programming for them must therefore be distinctive.

Given that there is so little research about this student population, in combination with tremendous need from the field for guidance about how to best serve LTELLs, we conducted a qualitative study in three New York City high schools to determine the characteristics of long-term ELLs. We gathered descriptive information about the students’ language usage and educational backgrounds, about the types of services LTELLs are currently receiving, and about their specific educational needs in secondary school. Our primary interest was in constructing a portrait of this student population as a starting point for future program design. Based on our findings, we determined three main categories of LTELLs that are offered in this article.

**Literature Review**

According to Olsen and Jaramillo (1999) and Freeman and Freeman (2002), there are three main groups of English language learners (ELLs) at the secondary level:

1. Newly Arrived with Adequate Schooling
2. Newly Arrived with Limited/Interrupted Formal Schooling (also known as Students with Interrupted Formal Education or SIFE)
3. Long-Term English Language Learners

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2 In recognition of its relevance for city schools, this study was funded by the New York City Department of Education.
The first group listed above, ‘Newly Arrived ELLs with Adequate Schooling,’ have been in the U.S. for five years or fewer and are typically literate in their home language because of the schooling they received in their country of origin. As a result, though these students often receive poor grades and low scores on standardized tests administered in English at the outset, they are usually able to acquire academic English and enter mainstream classrooms in a relatively short period of time (Callahan, 2006). The second group, new arrivals with limited and/or interrupted formal schooling, have limited or non-existent literacy in their home language, causing their academic achievement to be far below grade level (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Klein & Martohardjono, 2008; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).

Long-term English language learners, the third type of secondary ELLs listed above, are the focus of this study. These students are distinct from the two other groups because they are not new arrivals, but rather have been in the U.S. for seven or more years, and some are in fact U.S.-born (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2003; Authors, 2007; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). As a result, they are usually orally proficient in English and often sound like native speakers (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). In spite of their oral proficiency in English, these students are characterized by low levels of academic literacy in both English and their home language. As such, their reading and writing is usually below grade level in either language, and they often experience poor overall academic performance and high course failure rates (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). These students are frequently misperceived as ‘failures’ of ESL and bilingual programs.

There is a fair amount of overlap between long-term ELLs and students termed “generation 1.5,” a population of mainly U.S.-educated English learners that has received attention within TESOL scholarship, particularly in studies of higher education. Rumbaut and Ima (1988, as cited in Harklau et al, 1999) termed these students ‘generation 1.5,’ because they share characteristics of both first- and second-generation immigrants. As Harklau (2003) notes, generation 1.5 students
immigrated to the U.S. of school age, or were born in the U.S. but speak a language other than English at home, and have different learning needs from other ELLs because they are familiar with U.S. culture and schools, and yet “they are usually less skilled in the academic language associated with school achievement, especially in the area of writing” (Harklau, 2003: p. 1). Roberge (2002) offers an expansive definition of generation 1.5 students, which includes transnational children who migrate with their families back and forth between the U.S. and their country of origin. While generation 1.5 research highlights the differences between these students and traditional ELLs in helpful ways, researchers have primarily focused on college writing rather than the needs of these students in high school (Harklau et al, 1999; Harklau, 2003; Roberge, 2002; Thonus, 2003; see for exceptions Forrest, 2006 and Yi, 2007). Moreover, it is important to clarify the distinction between terms; only those generation 1.5 students in the U.S. for seven years or more and still classified as ELLs by the schools they attend would be considered ‘long-term ELLs.’

Freeman and Freeman (2002) conducted one of the only formal studies to date of long-term ELLs, examining a small sample of secondary students. They found that these students often received inconsistent programming, “in and out of various English as a Second Language [ESL] or bilingual programs without ever having benefited from any kind of consistent program support” (p. 5). And, they found many students receive adequate grades from teachers simply for completing the required work; as a result, these students often have a false perception of their academic achievement. A study of LTELLs in the Dallas Public Schools shows that the overall academic performance of these students does not continue to improve, and that there is a ceiling in the students’ levels of academic English attainment over time (Yang, Urrabazo, & Murray, 2001).

The reality is that ELLs in secondary schools arrive with a wide range of literacy practices and skills both in English and their native language, uneven content-area backgrounds, and vastly different family and schooling experiences (Abedi, 2004; Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri 2002; Ruiz-
de-Velasco, 2005). Literacy is therefore emerging as a major concern in the education of high school ELLs, as academic literacy skills are essential for achievement, particularly at the secondary level within the high-stakes testing climate (Menken, 2008). In fact, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) highlight the need for increased attention to what they term the ‘ELL academic literacy crisis.’

In spite of these findings, the typical high school English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual program is not designed to meet the needs of ELLs with limited or no native language literacy skills, such as long-term ELLs or SIFE students (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Meltzer & Haman, 2005). Most high school programs were designed to meet the needs of ELLs who arrive in U.S. high schools with adequate prior schooling and native language literacy skills (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; García, 1999). Because such programs assume literacy, they are typically not prepared to explicitly teach students the literacy skills across content areas that are necessary to navigate the secondary curriculum (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Callahan, 2006).

Moreover, though SIFE students have begun to receive greater attention in the literature in recent years (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Chamot, Keatley, & Schiavone, 2000; Klein & Martohardjono, 2008; Short, Boyson, & Coltrane, 2003), the same cannot be said for long-term ELLs, about whom there remains a dearth of existing research.

Methodology

We conducted a descriptive, qualitative study to provide preliminary information about the academic and social characteristics of LTELLs, that was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of long-term English language learners in New York City high schools (e.g., country of origin, language(s) spoken at home, school performance, etc.)?

2. What social and educational factors contribute to an ELL becoming a ‘long-term’ ELL (e.g., prior schooling experiences, ELL programming received, etc.)?
In order to answer these research questions, a research team from the Research Institute for the Study of Language in an Urban Society of the City University of New York gathered data over a six-month period (January-June, 2007) in three New York City high schools. This research team was comprised of [first and second authors] and three graduate assistants including [third author].

Although the literature typically defines an LTELL as a student in the U.S. for seven years or more (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000), the New York City Department of Education defines LTELLs as ELLs in the U.S. for six years or more; we followed the New York definition of LTELLs in this study.³

A purposeful sample of three schools was selected for inclusion in this study. Though all of the schools that participated serve significant numbers of long-term ELLs, each school is different in size, structure, and location. In these schools, as elsewhere in the city, LTELLs receive the same supports as all other ELLs, with no services specifically tailored to their needs; they are therefore in classes with newly arrived ELLs as well. The first school is a medium-sized vocational high school located in the Bronx, where many of the 200 ELLs are long-term. In that school, the majority of LTELLs interviewed were receiving ESL instruction. The second school included in this study is a small high school in Manhattan where all of the students are ELLs. In New York City, small, specialized high schools where all of the students are ELLs have a longstanding history of success (as in the International High Schools, cited in Ancess, 2003; Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007); however, LTELLs are typically unable to benefit from such schools because they are not new arrivals and do not meet admissions criteria. Although the second school states on paper that it admits only new arrivals, in fact several of its students are actually long-term ELLs. At this school, students receive bilingual education in a program where biliteracy development is emphasized across content-area subjects. The third site for our research is a large, traditional high

³ Though we adopted New York City’s definition of “six years or more” for the purposes of our study, as discussed in our findings, we came to the conclusion that LTELLs should be defined as ELLs in the U.S. for “seven years or more.”
school located in Queens where a culturally and linguistically diverse ELL population receives bilingual education and/or ESL. In addition, native language arts courses are available in a variety of languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and Bengali. Taken together, these schools exemplify the range of services currently being provided to LTELLs in New York City high schools.

To answer the research questions above, we interviewed LTELL students in depth using semi-structured interviews; the interview protocol can be seen in Appendix A. We also interviewed teachers and administrators who work with LTELLs to gain further information to answer our research questions (as per the protocol in Appendix B). For this research, the following data were collected and analyzed:

- Interviews with 29 long-term ELL students;
- Interviews with nine educators across school sites, including five administrators and four teachers; and,
- Document analysis of academic performance data available in school records.

Interviews were the primary source of data, and these were contextualized by school performance data. We examined students’ academic records, which included transcripts, report cards, test scores, birth certificates, home language identification surveys, and/or bilingual counseling progress reports.

To analyze the qualitative data, we recorded interviews using digital audio-recorders and then transcribed them. We analyzed the qualitative data by hand-coding according to themes that arose repeatedly, and the findings reported in this manuscript indicate the most frequent themes (as per LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The table presented in Appendix C provides a description of the students who participated in this study, and offers a summary of student characteristics. As the table indicates, the 29 LTELLs who participated in this study are in grades 9-12, range in age from 15-19 years old, and have been in the U.S. for 6-18 years. The vast majority of our student participants (90%) speak Spanish, which is reflective of overall ELL demographics; Spanish speakers in our sample primarily come from the
Dominican Republic, while others come from Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, and Venezuela. The sample also included speakers of Twi, Chinese, and Garífuna. The table in Appendix C will be referenced throughout the article, and terms explained; the names of all participants are pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Before moving onto findings, there are several limitations to this study worth acknowledging explicitly from the outset. First, because school records do not have the complete information about students’ past experiences, we rely on students’ self-reporting of past schooling experiences, which can cause certain inaccuracies. Second, within two of the three schools we studied, school data were imprecise regarding the length of time students have been ELLs, which limited our sample size.4 Third, school administrators selected students for us to include in the study, which did not allow for random sampling. Finally, because of the exploratory nature of this study, it perhaps raises as many questions as it offers answers. Nevertheless, we hope that the questions this study raises and the issues it addresses will guide further research in this area. In spite of their limitations, we feel the data provide a story worth telling at this time, as they present new and important understandings to better meet the needs of this student population.

Findings: Characteristics of LTELL students

The educational experiences of the majority of LTELLs are characterized by inconsistency and transience across countries, schools, and programs. Based on themes that arose in our interviews with teachers and students, we have identified three categories of LTELLs, which are as

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4 For instance, we came across students who were labeled as LTELLs, but had already tested out of their ELL status by passing the state's English proficiency test. Others had been in the U.S. for just a few years, and therefore did not qualify to partake in the study, in spite of school records which show only date of arrival and do not indicate whether a student has left the U.S. and then returned later.
follows: 1) *vaivén*\(^5\) students, who have moved back and forth between the U.S. and their family’s country of origin, 2) students with inconsistent U.S. schooling, who have shifted between bilingual education, ESL programs, and mainstream classrooms with no language support programming, and 3) transitioning students, who simply require additional time to acquire another language while they are developing academic content knowledge. As the first two categories – *vaivén* and inconsistent U.S. schooling – make up the overwhelming majority of the students in this study, it becomes apparent that LTELLs lack stability in their schooling experiences, compounding the already difficult task of learning a language for academic use. Further complicating the situation, half of the students fit into more than one of the above categories. What follows is a more detailed description of each category, with specific examples drawn from our data. In reading the sections that follow, it will be helpful to refer to the table in Appendix C, which offers an overview of student participants.

**Vaivén: Transnational Students Who Move Back & Forth between the U.S. and their Country of Origin**

Twelve out of the twenty-nine students interviewed fall into the category of *vaivén*, due to their movements between the U.S. and their family’s country of origin. Time periods spent in the country of origin lasted longer than just a vacation or summer trip, typically spanning at least one academic year and possibly extending to seven or eight years, with students attending school there. International moves often occur repeatedly in the educational history of LTELLs, creating a cycle of adjustment and real adjustment to a different country, language, school and family living situation.

Research about secondary ELLs in general, and long-term ELLs in particular, highlight large numbers of students who are in fact U.S.-born, and yet still receiving language support services. For example, one estimate is that one-third of all secondary ELLs are U.S.-born (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001).

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\(^5\) We credit García, Morín, and Rivera (2001) for the term *vaivén*, translated as ‘going and coming,’ which they used to describe the unique linguistic situation of New York Puerto Ricans. We expand the term here to capture the experiences of transnational students who have grown up in more than one country.
and another is that the majority are U.S.-born (approximately 70% in Dallas, according to Yang, Urrabazo, & Murray, 2001). Our findings offer a different explanation for such statistics. We found that the majority of U.S.-born students in our sample have actually moved back and forth to their family’s country of origin for sustained periods of time throughout their educational careers. Though they were indeed born in the U.S., they have not been here constantly, which accounts for their need to acquire English in high school.

A typical example is Luca, a high school junior. He was born and raised in the U.S. through first grade, completed second and third grades in the Dominican Republic, fourth and fifth grades in New York City, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the Dominican Republic (DR), and from ninth grade onward he has attended School 2 in New York City. His experiences are highlighted in the following quotation:

It was kind of hard, it was difficult. I mean, some things are in Spanish but I mean that’s what I hate about my situation, that I went to DR and forgot English. Not entirely, but most of the basic stuff. But yeah, it was difficult. (Luca, 11th Grade I.TELL, School 2, interview transcript)

In this passage, Luca reports a feeling shared by other vaivén students, that their transnational movements have curtailed their language development.

Due to frequent back and forth experiences from a very young age, vaivén students often have such a complicated history that even answering straightforward questions about their lives becomes challenging (interviewer’s voice is indicated in italics):

Where were you born?
I was born in Dominican Republic.
Uh-huh.
Not really. I was born here, but I was raised in the Dominican Republic.
Okay, so you were born in New York City. And then you were raised in the DR. So when did you go to the DR?
Was actually kind of a crazy experience. I studied one year here, I went back to the DR for a year, then I came back again for one year, and I went again for eight years. I came back here when I was a freshman.
(David, 12th Grade I.TELL, School 3, interview transcript)
For optimal language learning to take place, students need consistency and stability in their schooling.

In most cases, students received no English instruction when attending schools in the family’s country of origin, though they occasionally report taking English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. However, EFL usually occurs for only a small portion of the school day, and focuses on language in isolation from academic content and explicit literacy; thus, EFL instruction is often mismatched to the levels of oral English proficiency possessed by students who have spent sustained periods of time in U.S. schools. One student explains the difficulties her experiences pose not only for language learning, but content as well, in her discussion of Regents exams (New York’s high school exit exams):

The changes that I been going back and forth like being in DR, then coming over here, I’m getting used to class being all in English then I go back over there and it all in Spanish… It’s that like since I been going back and forth and studying here and studying over there. Like the History Regents it’s difficult ‘cuz my mind with the history over there I know it more than here. And then I come here I’m studying the history but I don’t get everything, you know? Like there’s my head, crazy sometimes. I was telling my teacher I wish the Regents was about DR, that way I would pass it [laughs].

(Tatiana, 10th Grade LTELLE, School 1, interview transcript)

In this excerpt, Tatiana explains that she is more knowledgeable about the history of the Dominican Republic than that of the U.S., due to her prior educational experiences. Her frustration with the history curriculum is associated with differences in language, content, and perspective. These differences across contexts, coupled with breaks in language learning, can significantly extend the length of time needed to become proficient in English, because neither English nor the home language is learned consistently.

_Vaivén and Gaps in Schooling_

While _vaivén_ LTELLs generally complete all grade levels sequentially, several have had significant gaps in their schooling as a result of their international movements in and out of school systems. When arriving in a different country or when returning to the U.S., a wide range of factors,
such as age appropriateness and a student’s proficiency in the language of instruction, impact a receiving school system’s decisions about grade level and program placement.

Marisol’s experiences in New York City and Mexico illustrate how inconsistencies and interruptions in schooling can occur. Marisol was born in the U.S. and attended school here through fifth grade. Her start was a difficult one as she had to repeat a grade early on, when she was mistakenly placed in a mainstream classroom; she only began receiving ESL in the third grade. Towards the end of fifth grade, Marisol relocated to Mexico. She was unable to read or write in Spanish when she arrived in Mexico, because her elementary schooling had been in English only. So, she was required to repeat the fifth grade twice more in Mexico and spent a total of three years in fifth grade due to her transnational move. Following her three years in Mexico, where she ultimately completed the fifth and sixth grades, she returned to New York City and was placed in the ninth grade. She therefore completely missed the seventh and eight grade curricula, in either language. Currently Marisol is 19 years old and in tenth grade at School 3. Not surprisingly, she has a low cumulative grade point average of 59.27%, and will likely be retained in grade again.

Jose Miguel, now in 10th grade at School 3, is another vaiévén student who has had his schooling interrupted. He attended two elementary schools in the U.S., and then during his second grade year moved to Mexico, where he stayed for two years. Jose Miguel did not attend school while he was in Mexico. However, when he returned to New York City he was placed into fourth grade due to his age, though he had missed most of second grade and all of third grade. Although such gaps in schooling most commonly affect vaiévén students, it is worth noting that this experience is at times shared by new arrivals. For example Liu, who is now a 10th Grade LTELL at School 3, arrived in the U.S. after completing third grade in China, and was placed into fifth grade.
Such placement practices create a difficult situation for students and their teachers, as the students are unprepared for the new and cumulative content. The principal from School 1 explains the severity of this issue for LTELLs as well as others in the following passage:

You have kids who start middle school here and...the kid goes home to the DR [Dominican Republic]. Then they come back and go to a placement center, and are placed in high school. I have 93 kids like that, 93 did not meet eighth grade promotional criteria that came here.
(Mr. C, principal, School 1, interview transcripts)

It is clear that major gaps in schooling will prolong the amount of time an ELL needs to acquire English and academic content in order to graduate from high school.

When students move it is often without the accompaniment of family. Instead, many spend their time living with different family members, creating another layer of complexity to an already challenging situation. Below Carola explains how her living situation changed across countries:

When I came back I was living with my godmother, then I moved, then I went to DR. When I came back I moved with my father, my real father. And then I moved with my aunt, then I moved back with my father, and again, and again, and then I moved with my aunt, and I already have a year with her.
(Carola, 11th Grade LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

The challenges faced by vaiven students are manifold. Academically, linguistically, and socially they are propelled back and forth between countries, cultures, and languages. As a result, they may not only require extra time, but also the support of educators who are knowledgeable about their circumstances.

**Inconsistent U.S. Schooling**

The second category of LTELLs we identified addresses inconsistency within schools and programs in the United States, and is striking because it impacts such a large number of students in our sample. The four sub-categories are: (a) ‘school hoppers,’ who attend multiple schools, beyond the typical three-school sequence in the U.S. of elementary-middle-high school; (b) students who change from bilingual to ESL programming or vice versa, when moving from one school to the
next; (c) students who have received inconsistent programming within the same school, being moved from ESL to bilingual classes or vice versa each year, due to incoherent school language policies; or, (d) the temporary absence of ELL programming altogether. Twenty out of the twenty-nine LTELL students interviewed fell into this category, while three of those experienced a combination of the above sub-categories (see the table in Appendix C).

‘School Hoppers’

Six students in the study reported frequent changes in schools. Shirley, a senior at School 2, has attended seven schools over the span of her life. She recalls, “I move almost every year.” She went to five schools in the U.S., as well as two schools in Puerto Rico (which also makes her a vaivén student). Two of the elementary schools she attended were in New York City and two were in Pennsylvania, where she experienced an interruption in ESL services. She returned to Puerto Rico for middle school and came back to New York City to attend School 2, where she has remained throughout high school. While she changed schools, she also changed programs, moving from bilingual education to English-only programming to predominately Spanish classes in Puerto Rico, and finally ending up in School 2 where she initially received bilingual programming and then transitioned into instruction entirely in English.

Another student who has frequently changed schools is Jimmy, a U.S.-born LTELL who has never attended school in another country. He attended three different elementary schools with radically divergent approaches toward language, until settling down to one middle and high school. He reflects on his experiences in the following passage:

My teachers [at the first elementary school] were Spanish and most of the time they spoke Spanish. And they taught us how to read in Spanish. Instead of showing us how to read and write English, they taught us in Spanish.

So it was really more Spanish…OK, so then what happened in 3rd grade?

In 3rd grade I switched schools, and you know they just spoke English to us. But you know the teachers just taught us in English. English, English, English, English. And most of the kids in my class were Spanish, but the teacher only taught us in English.

(Jimmy, 9th Grade LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)
As Jimmy explains, when he moved from one school to another, he switched from a bilingual program which offered instruction in Spanish to a monolingual English program; this change has likely impacted his acquisition of both English and Spanish, particularly with regard to academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

Programming Differences from School to School

Six LTELLs in our sample experienced inconsistent programming when making a usual transition from school to school, due to differences in each school’s language policies. For instance, Aggie began with English-only classes in elementary school and then shifted into bilingual programming in middle and high school. Academic literacy is a primary focus of elementary schooling, and because Aggie’s primary schooling was only in English she did not have the opportunity to develop literacy skills in Spanish. She then moved into a middle school where Spanish literacy skills were expected. Similarly, a few students at School 2 entered into its bilingual program at the secondary level having received only ESL instruction in the past. When these students entered School 2, they experienced Spanish instruction for the first time. This creates a double language-learning situation; students and their teachers note how challenging this can be for students, as students entering a bilingual program are expected to have literacy skills in their native language that match their oral skills. Not surprisingly, such mismatches in programming lengthen the time an ELL student maintains their ELL status.

Inconsistent School-Based Language Policies

Included within the category of inconsistencies in U.S. schooling are students who have failed to receive consistent language support programming due to shifts in their school’s language policy or uneven implementation of that policy in classrooms. In the ideal, a school will have in place a clear and cohesive school-wide language policy that is implemented in all classrooms accordingly (Corson, 1999; Freeman, 2004). So, for example, if the school offers a Chinese/English
bilingual program, then the school will provide that program from year to year in all subjects, and decisions about language distribution will be carefully planned and followed in each classroom of the school.

However, inconsistent school-based language policies are a major challenge, affecting at least six of the students in our sample, particularly in middle school. This is highlighted in the following:

*So when did you have the history teacher that taught in Spanish?*
That talked Spanish? When I was in sixth grade. But in seventh grade I used to have it at the first but then they changed it to another teacher, she only speak in English.

*.. And then what about math when you went to sixth grade?*
Math when I went to sixth grade it was in English. It was the teacher talked in English. Everything was in English.

*English only?*
Yeah. But then they change it. I don’t know, they did a lot of change. They put another teacher that she talked Spanish, everything was in Spanish.

*What grade was that?*
In sixth – they switched.

*And what about seventh grade?*
Seventh grade I had everything in English.

(Tatiana, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

In this excerpt, Tatiana explains how her language programming in middle school changed from year to year in a haphazard way. In history class, she received bilingual instruction in sixth grade and English-only instruction in seventh grade. In math, the instruction she received in sixth grade was in English for part of the year, bilingual for the remainder of that year, and then English-only again in seventh grade. As mentioned previously, Tatiana is also a vaivén student, making her particularly sensitive to changes in language of instruction and vulnerable to the ways such inconsistencies will impact her academic performance.

**Absence of ELL Programming**

A total of 15 LTELLs, over half of the total sample size, had a gap in their ESL/Bilingual services for a period of time while in the United States. These students received English-only programming in mainstream classrooms for a period of one to three years, without ESL or native language supports. Reasons for such gaps vary widely, but included in our sample are students born
in the U.S. who were initially not identified as ELLs, students mistakenly exited from ELL programming by their schools, students attending a private school or a school outside of the city that did not offer ELL services, and parental choice. Below is an example of a newly arrived student who skipped several grades yet had to wait two years before receiving services:

Liu came to the U.S. from China without English proficiency after completing grade three. In Queens, he was placed in fifth grade at a middle school where he ended up skipping a grade and for the first two years, fifth and sixth grades, did not receive any ESL services. (Liu, 10th Grade LTELL, School 3, interview notes)

The absence of ESL or bilingual programming, as experienced by the majority of students in this study, can prolong the length of time it takes to acquire an additional language.

In addition to experiencing inconsistencies in U.S. schooling, eight LTELLs are simultaneously in our category of vaivén students. This combination creates instability across countries, schools and programs, compounding their challenges to learning. When students are constantly in movement and placed into differing types of programs, the end result is subtractive, whereby neither language is fully developed in the academic context. Although the transnational movement of students and their families is something over which educators in the U.S. have little control, as elaborated in our later discussion, increasing the consistency that these students experience while in the U.S. is an area where school districts may wish to devote their energies.

**Transitioning**

This final, smallest category of LTELLs in our sample pertains to students who, at the time of this research study, were on the cusp of meeting the requirements for exiting ELL status. As indicated in the table of LTELL student participants in Appendix C, only four students in the study fell into this group. Interestingly, three of these have only been in the U.S. for six years and this group of LTELLs was overall the most successful in school. Francisco was one of those students.

He is currently in his sixth consecutive year of school in the U.S., and has a cumulative grade point
average of 90%, the highest of all the students in our sample. What sets Francisco apart from the other student participants is his educational background, whereby English has been added to Spanish without replacing his home language. He received very consistent primary education in his country of origin, the Dominican Republic. He then arrived in the U.S. for his last year of elementary school, and since then has regularly received bilingual education. In other words, while most LTELLs in our sample are characterized by high degrees of inconsistency in their prior schooling, Francisco’s schooling has been far more coherent.

As a group, transitioning students such as Francisco were found to be higher performing than other students in our sample and usually newer arrivals. Thus it seems that such students simply need some additional time to develop sufficient English proficiency to pass the state requirements to exit ELL status. This is supported by research which indicates it typically takes a minimum of five to seven years for an ELL to acquire academic English; Shohamy (2001) argues this process can in fact take up to 11 years, based on national research she conducted of immigrant students acquiring Hebrew in Israel. For this reason, we recommend an ELL only be considered long-term if he or she has been in the U.S. for seven years or more.

Language and School Performance

The students in our sample come from homes where only their native language is spoken, or where their native language is spoken in addition to English, and self-report that they are able to speak both languages well. Yet in spite of their oral bilingualism, the students and their teachers overwhelmingly identify literacy in English as the greatest challenge LTELL students face in school. Interestingly, the students prefer reading and writing in English over their native language because they feel their prior schooling has primarily emphasized English acquisition rather than native
language maintenance and development. Yet their limited literacy in both English and their native language proves to be a primary barrier to their academic success.

The overall performance of the students in this study is extremely low, highlighting the need for schools to further support LTELLs. For the purposes of this study, we focused on performance in English (including English Language Arts and ESL), native language courses, and mathematics. We also looked at standardized test scores, particularly on required state Regents exams. The cumulative grade point average of all of the students is 69.2%, or a D+.6 Table 1 shows a breakdown of grade point average (GPA) by school.

Table 1. Average Cumulative GPA of LTELLs, by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Average Cumulative GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>66.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>75.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
<td>65.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of all LTELLs</td>
<td>69.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued poor performance throughout their schooling has been found to be associated with lowered personal expectations among LTELLs or inaccurate perceptions of their own performance (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). While many of the students in this study self-report that they are doing well in school, their gauge for what “doing well” means is subjective:

The only two classes that I’m failing is math and English, but other than that I think I’m really doing good.
(Jemina, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript).

The average GPA of students reflects the reality that students are not in fact “doing well,” and that they are performing on average at the C and D level. Of the 29 students in this study, six have F averages.

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6 In the U.S., students receive grades on a scale from A to F (with F being a failing mark). A “D+” average is marginal, indicating that the students are barely passing.
Standardized tests are another obstacle LTELLs face in school. All high school students in New York are required to pass a set of five Regents exams to graduate from high school.\(^7\) Not surprisingly, the English Regents exam is a great challenge for LTELLs. The majority of LTELLs have also failed the Global History exam, even though many students have taken the test multiple times. The Math A Regents exam has proven to be difficult for the participants as well; about half of those who have taken the exam have passed.

Poor academic performance leads to grade retention for LTELLs, and many students in our sample have been retained in grade – some repeatedly. This, in turn, contributes to loss of confidence and motivation, as exemplified in the following quotation:

Um, I wanna tell you that I don’t belong in 10th grade as you can see ‘cause I just hit 18. I’m supposed to be in 12th and I had got left back in seventh and eighth, so like sometimes I feel embarrassed to be in a class you know that I don’t supposed to be in.
(Gaby, 10th Grade LTELL, School 1, interview transcript)

Gaby reports that her experiences as an overage LTELL cause her to withdraw in the classroom. As Gaby explains, failure often leads to further failure in school, as students lose confidence in their abilities.

In addition to the struggles LTELLs face in the classroom, many have excessive absences. The following quotation represents a common experience of participants in this study:

*When you came here, and also when you were in Mexico, did you ever miss school for any long periods of time, like a month or more?*
Only here... Like three years ago my grandma died, so my mom she like left for Mexico so I could stay with my cousins. But they live Jersey.
*And how long was that for?*
Month.
(Alina, 9th Grade LTELL, School 2, interview transcript)

\(^7\) To receive a high school diploma, students in New York must pass the English Regents Exam, one Math Regents Exam (usually students take Math A, a test of basic algebra and geometry), two Social Studies Exams, and one Science Regents Exam.
Life’s complexities are often intensified among transnational students; reasons such as personal and medical problems, as well as loss of family members, contribute to students’ limited opportunities to develop academic content and language in school.

As L.TELLs underperform compared to their native English speaking peers, an understanding of the unique obstacles they face can shed light on ways that schools can adapt and modify curricula, as well as provide additional supports in order to give these students the assistance they need to succeed. It is critical to note that the average GPA at School 2 is about 10 percentage points higher than in the other schools. Because the number of students in this study is small, we cannot yet draw conclusions as to why this is the case, however it does raise questions that can and should be addressed in future studies. Consideration should be made to the school’s curricular framework, student demographics, school culture, and other factors that may support or curtail student success. School 2 is a small bilingual school designed specifically for Spanish-speaking ELLs, where the curriculum focuses on native language literacy development alongside English literacy in all content areas. The success of high schools intended solely for ELLs, such as the International High Schools in New York City, suggests that a focused curriculum and a school-wide commitment to ELLs contributes to the overall academic success of the students (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007).

Implications

Our findings highlight how educational inconsistency is an overwhelmingly common characteristic of long-term ELLs. We therefore conclude that inconsistency in school and program enrollment is a key factor that contributes to an ELL becoming a long-term ELL, as these inconsistencies are likely to lengthen the amount of time it will take before an English language learner is ready to enter a mainstream classroom. In other words, our findings indicate that consistency is an integral part of successfully educating English language learners.
In particular, we recommend that movement by ELLs in and out of bilingual education programs, ESL programs, and mainstream classrooms be discouraged. When ELL students move from one school to another, they should only be placed into a school with a similar program to that in which they were previously enrolled. Parents and guardians of ELLs need to be informed of the deleterious effects of inconsistent programming, as do school placement officials. Additionally, though we recognize that schools cannot eliminate frequent transnational movements by students and their families, which are often due to economic and personal necessity, we suggest that schools counsel parents and guardians about how such movements can negatively impact their child’s education. We also recommend that schools adopt and adhere to clear, coherent schoolwide language policies, so they are able to provide their ELLs with consistent and constant programming; in their research, Freeman (2004) and Corson (1999) describe how to create and implement school language policies. This coherency would be helpful in curtailing how many ELLs fall into the ‘long-term’ group when they move into high school.

Furthermore, educators and education officials must be prepared to identify long-term ELLs. We offer in Appendix D an intake template that can be used to determine whether a new arrival to a school is a long-term ELL. This template gathers information about each year of prior schooling, including language(s) of instruction and how many years a student attended a given school. The use of this template will pinpoint any inconsistencies students may have previously experienced in their schooling.

In addition to improving program consistency, it is equally important that high schools change their programming and practices to address the needs of large numbers of LTELLs in high school who have limited literacy skills in either of the languages they speak. The vast majority of LTELLs in high school experience educational failure, making them a particularly high risk population for grade retention and dropout. We have noted how LTELLs are characterized by low
levels of academic literacy in English and their native language, and typically do not perform well in high school, regardless of the content-area subject. Thus, high schools can no longer assume prior literacy ability among their ELL students, but instead must be prepared to teach literacy in explicit ways. This means that literacy instruction must be infused into all subject areas, including math, science, and social studies in addition to English.

We have received funding from the New York City Department of Education to continue our research, and are now developing a program for Spanish-speaking LTELLs to be implemented in the 2008-2009 academic year in two New York City high schools. This program will focus on biliteracy development in English and Spanish, and on the implementation of explicit literacy instruction across all subject areas. Based on research findings, it will be possible to address the diverse needs secondary English learners through programming that is more attentive to individual differences.

Beyond programmatic changes, educational policies must also be adjusted to account for long-term English language learners. For example, in states which have passed anti-bilingual education legislation in recent years, such as California and Arizona, policy only requires that ELLs receive one year of language support services. Under federal education legislation in the U.S., entitled No Child Left Behind, schools are under pressure to exit ELLs from language support programs within three years (Menken, 2008). Such policy contradicts research which indicates that it typically takes an English language learner at least five to seven years to acquire sufficient academic English to succeed in classrooms where instruction is only in English (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). For long-term ELLs, English acquisition takes even longer than average. Thus it is essential that policies which impact schools, educators, and ELL students recognize that language learning is a process which takes time.

Acknowledgements
We thank the New York City Department of Education’s Office of English Language Learners for their funding in support of this research. We also acknowledge Ricardo Otheguy and Michael Newman for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. In addition, we thank Alexander Funk and Jeremy Rafal, doctoral students in Linguistics at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York for their assistance in collecting data for this study.

References


Authors. (2007). Meeting the needs of long-term English language learners in high school. Report submitted to the NYC Department of Education.


**Word Count:** 8,700
Appendix A: Student Interview Protocol

1) Where were you born?/What is your country of origin?
   a) What language(s) do you speak at home?
   b) Which language is used most at home – [home language (L1)] or English?
   c) What language(s) do you speak with your friends?

2) When did you first come to the United States?
   a) How long have you been in this country?

3) Did you attend school in your country of origin?
   a) Did you know how to read in [L1] when you came to the U.S.?
   b) Did you know how to write in [L1] when you came to the U.S.?
   c) Have you ever returned to [country of origin] and attended school there? If so, when?
   d) Did you ever miss school for a long period? If so, when? For how long?

4) What schools have you attended since the first time you arrived to the U.S.
   a) What is the name of each school?
   b) How long did you attend each school?
   c) At those schools did you receive English as a Second Language (ESL) and/or bilingual education (were classes taught in English and [L1])?
   d) [For each school]: At [school name], in what language(s) were your classes (Math, Science, Social Studies, etc.)? What percent of each language did your teachers use?

5) Do you feel more comfortable speaking in English or [home language], or both equally?
   a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?

6) Do you feel more comfortable reading and writing in English or [L1], or both equally?
   a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?

7) In the schools you have attended, have you learned reading and writing more in English or [L1]?
   a) Have you had the opportunity to read or write in [L1] in the schools you have attended?
   b) Do you read books in [L1]? If so, can you give examples of books you have read?

8) Which of your schools, programs or teachers have helped you achieve and learn the most in school?
   a) Why? Can you offer an example or tell a story to describe this?

9) Which schools or programs didn’t help? Why?

10) What do you think has stood in your way from learning English more quickly?

11) [For students who have attended many schools]: Why do you think you’ve attended so many schools?

12) What do you think are your strengths and weaknesses in school?
   a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe your strengths? And to describe your weaknesses?
   b) How are you doing in school (grades, etc.)?
   c) Do you recall ever learning about your own background (country, ethnicity, etc)? If yes, how did you feel about it?
   d) What were the most meaningful topics you’ve learned about in school? Why?
   e) What were the least meaningful topics you’ve learned about in school? Why?
Appendix B: Teacher/Administrator Interview Protocol

1) How many long-term ELLs do you serve?
2) What educational program(s) do they receive (e.g., bilingual education, ESL, etc.)?
   a) How is the program structured?
   b) Do these students receive the same services as other ELLs?

3) What do you see are the strengths and challenges for long-term ELL students in school?
   a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe this?
   b) What do you think are the needs of long-term ELLs in school?
   c) How are their needs the same or different from other ELL students?

4) What methods or teaching approaches have you tried that you think are effective with these students?
   a) Can you tell a story or give an example to describe this?
   b) Are there certain approaches you think don’t work for these students that might work for other ELLs?

5) What assessment data have you collected about the long-term ELL students at this school?
   a) What scores have they received on the English Regents? Other Regents?
   b) What scores have they received on the New York State ESL Achievement Test?
   c) What grades have they received in their classes?
   d) What do their portfolios/classroom-based assessments/attendance records indicate about their school performance?
## Appendix C: Table of LTELL Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School #</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Home Language(s)</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Total years in US</th>
<th>Schools Attended</th>
<th>Location of Schooling</th>
<th>ELL Services Received</th>
<th>Cumulative GPA</th>
<th>LTELL category</th>
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<td>Aggie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Dominican Republic (DR)</td>
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<td>x (by choice)</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Twi</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>NYC, Columbia</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>Alina</td>
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<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Spanish, English</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>NYC, DR</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Ecuador</td>
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<td>Spanish, English</td>
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<td>Grade</td>
<td>Home Language(s)</td>
<td>Country of Birth</td>
<td>Total years in US</td>
<td># Schools Attended</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>NYC</td>
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<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NYC, VA</td>
<td>x x x</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>NYC, DR</td>
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<td>x x</td>
<td>75.71%</td>
<td>Vaivén + inconsistent U.S. schooling</td>
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<td>LTELL category</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>DR, NYC</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>65.73%</td>
<td>Inconsistent U.S. schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>55.20%</td>
<td>Inconsistent U.S. schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>NYC, Puerto Rico</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>77.06%</td>
<td>Vaivén + inconsistent U.S. schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NYC, DR</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>72.58%</td>
<td>Vaivén + inconsistent U.S. schooling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NYC, China</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>64.26%</td>
<td>Transitioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- ESL: English as a Second Language
- Bil: Bilingual
- None
- NYC: New York City
- DR: Dominican Republic
- Puerto Rico
- China
Appendix D: Long-Term English Language Learner Intake Template

In order to get a more complete picture of ELL students’ schooling experiences, and to identify students who are LTELLs, we recommend that schools interview students in order to fill out the table below. We advise schools to use this template whenever they receive a new ELL student, even if the student has a file already and has previously attended school in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>School Name/Number</th>
<th>Location (Borough/ City, State, Country)</th>
<th>ELL Services Received (Check as many as apply)</th>
<th>Language(s) of Instruction</th>
<th>Additional Information</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>ESL, Bilingual, Dual Language, No ELL Services</td>
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</table>

Daycare
Pre-K