

Grouping English learners in classrooms yields no benefit in reading development, new study finds

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Grouping English learners together in classrooms, a longstanding practice in schools, has no impact—positive or negative—on reading development for elementary school students, shows a new study by a

team of literacy education researchers.

"When I taught [middle school](#) 20 years ago, I noticed that my English learner students were separated from their native English-speaking peers all day long," says NYU Steinhardt associate professor Michael Kieffer, the study's lead author. "Data show that this practice continues in many places today, encouraged by policies and educators' good intentions to provide targeted services. Our study challenges this approach by demonstrating it has no association with reading growth."

"English learners" (ELs) are students identified as having limited English proficiency and who are receiving services designed to teach English language skills.

Kieffer and his co-author, Andrew Weaver, a doctoral [student](#) at NYU Steinhardt, analyzed the progress of 783 ELs from a large national sample of students whose development was tracked from kindergarten through fifth grade. The data were collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics as part of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten 2010- 2011 Cohort.

Using teacher reports on the percentage of ELs in their [classrooms](#), the researchers examined whether high EL concentrations were linked to reading development. Their analysis controlled for students' socioeconomic status and academic and social-emotional skills, as well as school-level variables, such as percentages of POC students.

Their findings, published in *Educational Researcher*, indicated neither a positive nor [negative relationship](#) between EL concentration and reading development.

"The absence of positive effects raises questions about the common assumptions that underlie educators' efforts to separate ELs into distinct

classrooms," the authors write.

They say that these results may be explained by the positive and negative effects of grouping EL students cancelling each other out. For example, the benefit of more targeted language instruction in a primarily EL classroom might be negated by the benefits that come with engaging with fluent English speakers.

"In future research, we hope to look more closely into classrooms to understand how teachers modify their instruction when teaching ELs in more and less integrated settings. This work will aim to unpack how and when grouping ELs together may have more specific benefits and disadvantages," Kieffer says.

More information: Class Concentration of English Learners and Their Reading Growth, *Educational Researcher* (2023).
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