

## American Indian English Learner Students and English Language Development

American Indian English learner students have unique educational needs; for some students, their Native language is their first language. Other American Indian English learners may speak English as a first language but have not acquired standard academic English proficiency, or they may use a modified English influenced by their Native language.<sup>1</sup>

Helping English learner students, including American Indian English learner students, achieve English language proficiency is critical to their long-term academic success. Students who are not classified as English proficient within six years in U.S. schools are at risk for becoming long-term English learner students.<sup>2</sup>

The Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest's [English Learners Research Partnership](#) with the New Mexico Public Education Department and other Native American education stakeholders conducted a study to better understand American Indian English learner students' progress toward English language proficiency.<sup>3</sup> [Read about our study, English Language Development Among American Indian English Learner Students in New Mexico, here.](#)



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The study found that American Indian English learner students who were reclassified as English proficient within five years of kindergarten were more likely to meet grade-level standards in English language arts and math in grades 3 and 4 than were American Indian English learner students who were not reclassified as English proficient.

### Key findings to inform education leaders

Only 18 percent of American Indian students identified as English learner students in kindergarten were reclassified as English proficient within five years.

American Indian English learner students who attended a school<sup>4</sup> with a bilingual multicultural education program for at least four years were reclassified as English proficient and met grade-level standards on the New Mexico state assessments in English language arts and math at higher rates (19 percent) than did students who never attended a school with a bilingual multicultural education program (12 percent).

### How can administrators create systemic supports to help American Indian English learner students achieve English language proficiency?

**Explore the root causes of low English proficiency** among American Indian English learners and identify strategies to help support and address those needs.

- A better understanding of the root causes of barriers to English proficiency may help inform school- or district-level strategies to increase the percentage of American Indian English learner students who are reclassified by grade 3.<sup>5</sup>

Focus on **ensuring your teachers possess the appropriate knowledge and skills** needed to support American Indian English learner students.

- General education teachers may need additional training or professional development to develop the skills and expertise needed to bridge the gap between students' home nonstandard varieties of English to academic English.<sup>1,6</sup> The specific knowledge and skills needed include becoming fluent in standard English, including all four literacy domains: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing.

Provide opportunities for American Indian English learner students to **engage in culturally relevant curricula and instruction**. Numerous studies have linked improved student outcomes with curricula and instruction relevant to American Indian English learner students, but few American Indian English learner students have opportunities to engage in culturally relevant curricula and instruction.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

- Consider collecting data to improve bilingual multicultural education programming and learn what strategies work best for your students; observe instructional practices, and interview teachers and students.

To support teachers in improving American Indian English learner students' reading, speaking, and writing skills, district and school leaders in New Mexico should consider using the [Promising Practices to Support English Learner Students](#) resource and its accompanying User Guide, developed by the New Mexico Public Education Department in collaboration with Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest.



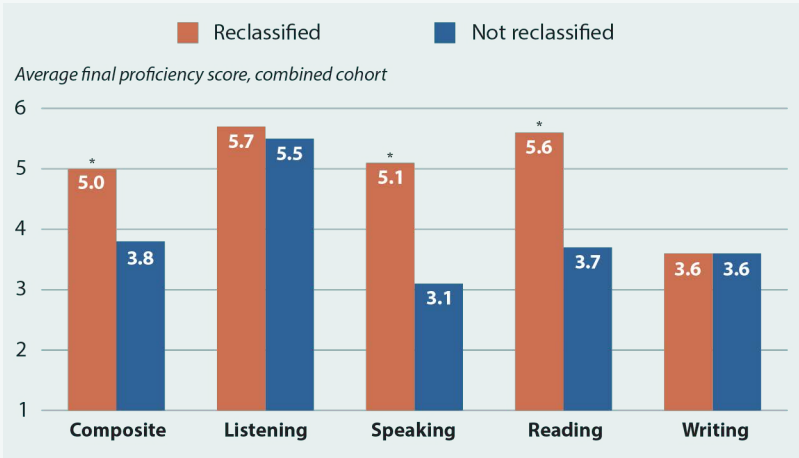
See our [REL Southwest evidence review](#) to learn more about promising culturally responsive practices to support American Indian English learner students.

## Key findings to inform educators

American Indian English learner students reclassified as English proficient within five years of kindergarten had higher final English proficiency scores in two domains—Speaking and Reading—than did students who were not reclassified.

American Indian English learner students who were reclassified within five years and those students who were not reclassified often did not reach proficiency in writing.

*American Indian English learner students in the 2013/14 and 2014/15 kindergarten cohorts who were classified as English proficient had higher final English proficiency scores on the reading and speaking domains.*



\*Denotes a difference of .25 standard deviations or greater between American Indian English learner students who were reclassified and those who were not, which is considered a meaningful difference.

## How can teachers provide American Indian English learner students with additional supports to help improve their reading, speaking, and writing skills?

**Prioritize instruction in speaking and reading** and provide American Indian English learner students with additional supports to help improve their reading, speaking, and writing skills.

The What Works Clearinghouse [Practice Guide Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School](#) recommends

- providing students with a set of **academic vocabulary words** intensively across several days using a variety of instructional activities,
- **integrating oral and written English language instruction** into content-area teaching,
- providing **structured opportunities for students to develop written language skills**, and
- providing **small-group instructional interventions** to students needing additional support in the areas of literacy and English language.<sup>7</sup>

**Using a culturally responsive approach to implementing these strategies** has the potential to further improve American Indian English learner students' writing skills.<sup>8,9</sup>



Visit this [REL Southwest infographic](#) to learn about *Culturally Responsive Practices to Support American Indian English Learners' Success* and learn about our [training series](#) designed to support teachers in implementing culturally responsive practices that may help American Indian English learners understand academic language.

- <sup>1</sup> Carjuzaa, J., & Ruff, W. G. (2016). American Indian English language learners: Misunderstood and underserved. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1–11. [https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/12658/Ruff\\_CE\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/12658/Ruff_CE_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- <sup>2</sup> Regional Educational Laboratory West. (2016). *Long-term English learner students: Spotlight on an overlooked population* (Research Brief). <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LTEL-factsheet.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Stoker, G., Arellano, B., & Lee, D. H. (2022). *English language development among American Indian English learner students in New Mexico* (REL 2022–135). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>
- <sup>4</sup> REL Southwest could not examine student-level enrollment in bilingual multicultural education program courses with the available data.
- <sup>5</sup> Chin, M. J. (2021). The effect of English learner reclassification on student achievement and noncognitive outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 14(1), 57–89. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1293503>
- <sup>6</sup> Brayboy, B. M. J., & Castagno, A. E. (2009). Self-determination through self-education: Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous students in the USA. *Teaching Education*, 20(1), 31–53. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ830122>
- <sup>7</sup> Baker, S., Lesaux, N., Jayanthi, M., Dimino, J., Proctor, C. P., Morris, J., Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Kieffer, M. J., Linan-Thompson, S., & Newman-Gonchar, R. (2014). *Teaching academic content and literacy to English learners in elementary and middle school* (NCEE 2014-4012). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544783>
- <sup>8</sup> McCarty, T. L. (2009). *State of the field: The role of Native languages and cultures in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students' academic achievement*. Policy paper prepared for the Promising Practices and Partnerships in Indian Education Working Group and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Indian Education Programs, under contract to Kauffman & Associates, Inc. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52cf1070e4b048ae22d972b2/t/54aac6b3e4b0c309d027948a/1420478131256/McCarty+\(2011\).+Role+and+Impact+of+Native+Languages+and+Cultural+Context.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52cf1070e4b048ae22d972b2/t/54aac6b3e4b0c309d027948a/1420478131256/McCarty+(2011).+Role+and+Impact+of+Native+Languages+and+Cultural+Context.pdf)
- <sup>9</sup> Carjuzaa, J., & Ruff, W. G. (2016). American Indian English language learners: Misunderstood and underserved. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1–11. [https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/12658/Ruff\\_CE\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/12658/Ruff_CE_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)