

English as a Second Language at California's Community Colleges

The California Community Colleges (CCC) educate a large number of English Learners (ELs)—more than either of the state's other two higher education systems. Given the link between [English proficiency](#) and access to high-wage jobs, lower levels of unemployment, and greater productivity, the CCC system has a unique opportunity to help ELs and their families achieve social and economic mobility. And the success of ELs—who make up 19 percent of students in K–12 schools across the state—is important for California's future.

In fall 2021, colleges began implementing reforms to English as a Second Language (ESL) that were mandated by Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705). In recognition of the need for effective and equitable ESL pathways, AB 705 requires colleges to maximize the probability that students who enroll in credit-bearing ESL courses complete transfer-level English (TLE) within three years.

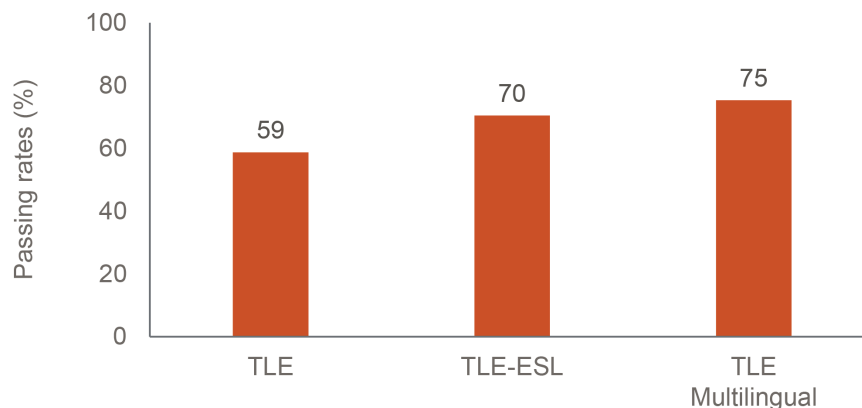
Like similar reforms in English and math, ESL reform involves moving away from heavy [reliance on placement tests](#), which do not always provide a full understanding of a student's English language and literacy skills, and shortening ESL course sequences—[ample research indicates](#) that lengthy sequences reduce students' chances of completing TLE.

Colleges are making progress on ESL reform

Colleges implemented AB 705 reforms to ESL despite the challenges created by COVID-19. By fall 2021, many colleges had already moved away from standardized placement tests and toward guided placement, which engages students more actively in the placement process.

Colleges have also made progress in shortening their ESL course sequences to maximize students' probability of completing transfer-level English within three years. In 2021, over half of colleges offered sequences of four levels or less, compared to just under one-third in 2016. Moreover, AB 705's recognition that ESL students are not necessarily in need of remediation but are seeking proficiency in an additional language has accelerated the growth in transferrable ESL courses.

Passing rates are higher in courses designed for ESL or multilingual students



Source: Authors' calculations using COMIS data.

Notes: Passing rates from fall 2021. First time community college students. N is 102,812 for TLE, 220 for TLE-ESL and 154 for TLE Multilingual.

Colleges are now required to place entering ELs who are US high school graduates in college composition. Since some of these ELs need language support, a growing number of colleges are offering transfer-level English ESL-equivalent (TLE-ESL) courses, TLE courses designed for multilingual speakers, or ESL corequisite support for TLE. So far, success rates in those courses are above 70 percent regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or age—and higher than rates in traditional TLE offered in English departments.

More work lies ahead

Implementing AB 705 in ESL during a historic pandemic has been challenging, and we cannot yet disentangle the impact of reforms from the effects of the pandemic. Also, given AB 705's three-year timeframe for completion of transfer-level English or the ESL equivalent, it is too early to assess the reform's impact on this key outcome. Finally, continued variation in placement criteria and course offerings across colleges could undercut efforts to ensure equitable access and outcomes. Our research suggests several ways to bolster ongoing implementation efforts.

Expand access to college composition for all English learners. [Recent research](#)—including our analysis of the first term of AB 705 implementation for ESL—suggests that ELs who have direct access to college composition have higher rates of success than those who start in courses one or more levels below college composition. All colleges should be encouraged to design composition courses that support all English Learners. As these courses become more widespread, it will be important to assess their effectiveness and determine whether access and outcomes are equitable.

Monitor the validity and effectiveness of placement rules and course sequences. It will be critical for the Chancellor's Office and individual colleges to assess the validity and effectiveness of placement rules and methods. Differences in placement policies and cut scores across colleges coupled with variation in direct access to TLE or TLE-ESL courses may lead to inequitable outcomes, as a student's chances of completing TLE will continue to depend on where that student enrolls in college.

Deepen connections between ESL reforms and other systemwide initiatives. The rising number of ESL courses that are transferrable to both UC and CSU offers opportunities to connect ESL reform with larger systemwide programs—including the Vision for Success, College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP), and Guided Pathways.

Provide guidance and information to support ongoing implementation efforts. As colleges continue to implement ESL reforms, it will be important for the Chancellor's Office to provide guidance. For example, the Chancellor's Office could clear up uncertainty about how [a new law \(AB 1705\)](#) builds on AB 705 affects ESL. It will also be imperative for researchers to help inform and improve implementation efforts.

Establish a longitudinal data system. The governor and the legislature are supporting efforts to establish a data system that connects K–12, higher education, workforce, and social services data; this system would include information on English Learners in high school, which would help researchers understand the trajectories of ESL students at community colleges and beyond.

Supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Sutton Family Fund. Adapted by Mary Severance from [English as a Second Language at California's Community Colleges](#), by Olga Rodriguez, Laura Hill, and Daniel Payares-Montoya.