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British Columbia ESL Policy Reform: Reduces Costs and Maintains Student Outcomes

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POPULATION CHANGE AND LIFECOURSE

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Summary

English as a Second Language (ESL) reform in British Columbia (BC) has led to a slight increase in standardized tests reading scores of students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, while also reducing costs. ESL is a program aimed at helping young immigrants whose home language is not English to improve their language skills in order to do better at school. Students' relative standings in standardized tests in the province were compared before and after the implementation of the reform. The prediction that the reform would have adverse effects was not supported. The reform, implemented in 1999 in BC, limited supplementary funding to five years per student and increased the value of the annual funding supplement for ESL students. The reform was found to have a dramatic impact on the exit rate of ESL programs at the end of the fifth year.

Key Findings

- The researchers restricted their sample to students with Grade 7 standardized test scores. The enhanced annual supplement led to a slight increase in the relative reading scores for ESL students after the reform, but no change in their numeracy scores. The sample includes almost 80,000 students who are divided into three groups - those who have never taken ESL and whose home language is English; those who have never taken ESL but whose home language is non-English; and those who have ever taken ESL (almost all of whom have a non-English home language).
- Although the reform led to an increase in the value of the annual supplement from \$955 to \$1100, it resulted in a substantial reduction in the overall cost of ESL programs by promoting a high exit rate at the end of the fifth year. The research was conducted against a backdrop of public concern about the costs induced by the special funding requirements for ESL services. The governments of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario all have restricted the number of years of special funding for ESL students.
- The policy change had a very large impact on the conditional probability of a sixth year of ESL, with student exit rates rising from 18 percent to 95 percent at the end of the fifth year. The loss in supplementary funding eliminated a sixth year of ESL for all but a few students.
- The researchers do point out that they were not able to control for the socio-economic characteristics of the individual students' families during their research and, due to data restrictions, they were not able to observe the longer term effects of these policy changes.



ESL Reform in British Columbia

Results

Table 1 shows the relative standing of students in the Grade 7 tests both before and after the reform. These estimates control for other factors such as sex, month of birth, home language and neighbourhood economic characteristics. Rows 1, 2, and 3 indicate the Pre-Reform differences among groups of students in their standardized numeracy and reading scores. The omitted group (Never ESL, Always English as Home Language) has a higher score in the reading test than the other groups. For students with five years or more of ESL, both their numeracy and reading test scores are lower than those of the omitted group, with the reading score being more dramatically lower.

Row 4 presents the differences between Pre-Reform and Post-Reform scores among all groups in the Greater Vancouver Area. These estimates indicate significant but very slight declines in the numeracy and reading scores in the Greater Vancouver Area relative to the provincial average.

Rows 6 and 7 indicate a result common to both groups of ESL students (1- 4 years and 5 or more years), that is, there was no change in the numeracy score and a slight improvement in the reading score relative to the scores of the Never ESL (Always English as Home Language) group.

Table 1: Estimates of Factors Associated with Test Scores for All Student Groups

Pre-reform differences among groups: never ESL, always EHL as comparison group			
		Numeracy	Reading
1	Never ESL, ever NEHL	-0.035 (0.041)	-0.158*** (0.034)
2	1 to 4 years ESL	0.049 (0.031)	-0.146*** (0.026)
3	5 or more years ESL	-0.163*** (0.035)	-0.447*** (0.029)
4	Post-reform cohort	-0.032** (0.013)	-0.031*** (0.011)
Differences in differences: never ESL, always EHL as comparison group			
		Numeracy	Reading
5	Post-reform cohort*(never ESL, ever NEHL)	0.086*** (0.037)	0.124*** (0.037)
6	Post-reform cohort*(1 to 4 years ESL)	0.007 (0.026)	0.103*** (0.022)
7	Post-reform cohort*(5 or more years ESL)	-0.028 (0.027)	0.076*** (0.02)

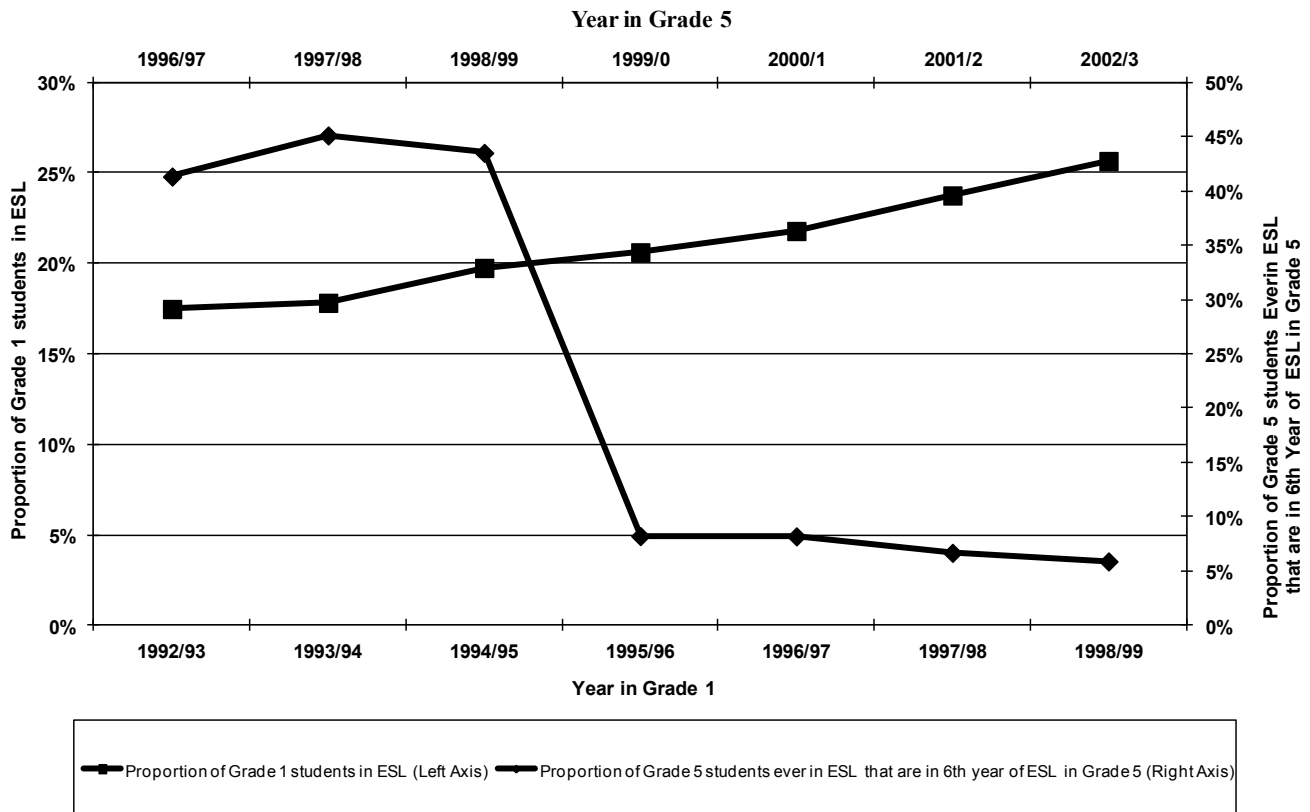
ESL-English as a Second Language; **EHL**-English Home Language; **NEHL**-Non-English Home Language

The sample was restricted to school districts in the Greater Vancouver Area, which contains 40 percent to 50 percent of Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) students in the province but 80 percent to 90 percent of the ESL students. ESL students in K-12 comprised from 15 to 24 percent of the student body in the Great Vancouver Area during the years from 1991 to 2005, numbering from around 30,000 to 50,000 students per year.



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Proportion of Grade 1 Students in ESL, and Proportion of Grade 5 Students Ever in ESL that are in 6th Year of ESL in Grade 5



The above figure indicates the impact of the policy reform on the numbers of years that students spend in ESL. The line with the squares shows the proportion of Grade 1 students who were in ESL. This line confirms that ESL is not only common in the Greater Vancouver Area but that the proportion of Grade 1 students in ESL was increasing over this period (1992/93 to 1998/99) from 17 percent to 26 percent.

The line with the diamonds refers to a subset of these same seven cohorts, showing the proportion of students who have six years of ESL. In the three cohorts that reached Grade 5 before the five-year supplementary funding limit took effect in 1999/00, 42 percent or

more of students ever in ESL are in their sixth year of ESL. This proportion falls to 5 percent or less for each of the cohorts that reached a potential sixth year of ESL after the funding limit took effect.

However, this result could have been affected by the fact that some students may have started ESL late and, for this reason, were not yet in their sixth year of ESL as of Grade 5. For those students who started ESL in Kindergarten, the 5-year provincial cap affected a substantial proportion, with the exit rate soaring from 18 percent to 95 percent.



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Conclusion

This research was conducted against the background of concern over the impact of the policy reform on student outcomes. Although the research cannot provide us with longer term effects, the short term effects of the policy changes seem to be positive. The researchers believe the increase in the value of the annual ESL supplement may be having a positive effect on reading scores, and this is not offset by the limitation to five years of supplementary funding. The analysis shows that there was no major decline in the test scores of the students with ESL or a non-English home language in the Vancouver area relative to provincial average, although there had been an initial adjustment period after the policy changes.

Data in this study imply that the reform resulted in a reduction in the overall cost of ESL due to the dramatic increase in the ESL exit rate at the end of the fifth year. The authors speculate that improvement in the students' reading scores, as shown in this study, may lead to an increase in the exit rate prior to the fifth year, thus further increasing the cost savings attributed to the reform.

Canada has a high rate of immigration and ESL programs play an important role in helping young immigrants adapt. Using data provided by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia, the researchers explored the educational impact of the 1999 package of reforms among Grade 7 students in the Greater Vancouver Area. Their research may provide insight for policy makers in the other provinces which provide targeted funding for ESL services.

About the Study

This brief is based on "[ESL Policy Reform and Student Academic Achievement](#)" by Martin Dooley and Cesar Furtado, published in 2013 in the *Canadian Public Policy* (Vol. 39 No. 1, pages 21-43). The brief was written by Meng Yu. For more information, contact [Martin D. Dooley](#).