

Improvement in California? What CELDT Scores Really Tell Us

By Stephen Krashen

University of Southern California

The California English Language Development Test (CELDT), a test taken by English language learners (ELLs) in California, categorizes scores into five levels: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, and advanced. Soifer (2005) argues that the percentage of students scoring in the top two levels has increased (see Table I) and that this improvement shows that all-English “immersion” programs are working for ELLs in California.

Table I. Percentage of ELLs Scoring in Top Two Levels of CELDT

Year	Top 2 Levels
2001	25%
2002	34%
2003	43%
2004	47%

Top 2 levels = early advanced and advanced

Source: Soifer (2005)

The 2005 results, announced on February 16, 2006, show no change since 2004, with 47% again at the top two levels. There are several reasons to suspect that this “increase” is not the result of a genuine improvement.

First, the CELDT was introduced in 2001. Research tells us that the first time a new commercial test is given, scores appear to be low; then they increase each year as students and teachers get more familiar with the test and instruction is more focused on the content of the test (Linn, Graue, and Sanders, 1990). After a few years improvement stops. The trajectory of CELDT scores is, in other words, typical of what happens with new tests. The initial increase and subsequent flattening out of scores may have nothing to do with students improving or not improving.

Second, there is reason to suspect that the apparent increase in the percentage of ELLs at the top two levels is the result of a build-up of students at those levels that has nothing to do with actual improvement. Looking at 4th graders, Hill (2006) noted that between 2002 and 2004 there was an increase in the percentage of students at levels 4 and 5 who had already reached these levels the year before, in grade 3. The percentage of those who improved by moving into the top two levels (early advanced and advanced) actually decreased.

Table II shows the percentage of total 4th grade LEP children who “moved up” into the top two categories of the CELDT from the year before. According Hill, data for other grade levels was similar.

Table II. Percentage of ELLs in Top Two Levels and Percentage Who Had “Moved Up” to Those Levels That Year

	Observed	Moved Up
2002	44%	36%
2003	43%	32%
2004	45%	30%

Source: Hill (2006)

In other words, the increasing percentage of ELLs at the top two levels is an illusion, due to the fact that there is a traffic jam at levels four and five, with many students staying there year after year. In reality, the percentage of ELLs scoring in the early advanced and advanced categories appears to be decreasing, at least in the years 2002 to 2004. We do not know if this was the case after 2004, but there is a clear increase in the percentage of children in the top two levels between 2002 and 2004 (Table I).

It is also hard to claim that California’s children are thriving under English immersion when their actual rate of progress is so slow. The average gain per year, in both 2002 and 2003, was well under one level out of five (see Table III).

Table III. Average Yearly Growth on the CELDT (proficiency levels)

Grade	2002	2003
K - 2	0.75	0.8
3 - 5	0.79	0.79
6 - 8	0.57	0.47
9 - 12	0.38	0.43

Source: Jepsen and de Alth (2005)

References

Hill, E. 2006. *Update, 2002-2004: The progress of English learner students*. Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst.

Jepsen, C. and de Alth, S. 2005. *English learners in California schools*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.

Linn, R., Graue, E., and Sanders, N. 1990. Comparing state and district test results to national norms: The validity of claims that “everyone is above average.” *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 10: 5-14.

Soifer, D. 2005. *Latest California test scores bring good news for English learners*. Heartland Institute, April 1, 2005 (www.heartland.org).