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NEW KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

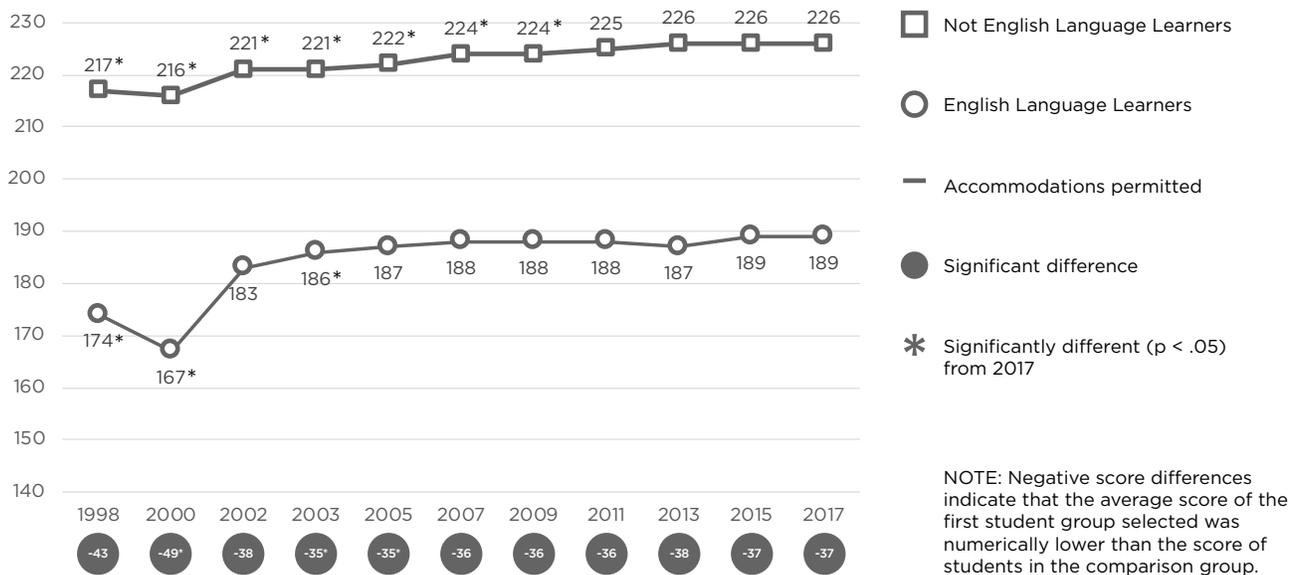
Developing Tools for Assessing Spanish Language Literacy

THE BIG PICTURE

The number of U.S. public school students classified as English Learners has grown significantly over the past two decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there were 5 million English Learners in 2015 compared to 3.8 million in 2000, and 77 percent of all English Learners in the U.S. are Spanish speaking.¹ Historically, students whose first language was anything other than English have been taught to adopt English as their primary language through transitional education programs rather than dual-language programs designed to foster proficiency in both their native language and English.

English Learners have also performed at significantly lower levels than their non-English Learner peers — especially in reading. According to the [2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), reading scores for fourth-grade English Learners were 37 points lower than monolingual English-speaking fourth graders.²

Trend in fourth-grade NAEP reading average scores and score gaps, by status as English Language Learners³



Performance like this for fourth-grade students presents a concern and challenge. Research shows that students who are not able to read by the end of third grade are likely to remain poor readers for the remainder of their academic years and beyond. Also, students who fall behind in reading are more likely to fall behind in other academic areas.⁴

Decades of research and developments in educational programming have illuminated more effective ways to educate English Learners and all students. Research shows that students who receive bilingual instruction have outperformed students in English-only instruction on several measures.⁵ They score higher in English Language Arts and on measures of English proficiency, and students who maintain biliteracy through high school are [less likely to drop out and more likely to attend college](#).⁶ Research has also shown students who receive bilingual education [have more cohesive family relations and fewer behavior problems in school](#).⁷

While evidence of the importance of bilingual instruction in promoting positive student outcomes is strong, implementing bilingual instruction can be challenging. Developing and systematizing effective classroom supports and learning for English Learners continues to be a challenge, and there [aren't enough teachers in the workforce who are both bilingual and trained in bilingual instruction](#).⁸

NEW UEI DEVELOPMENTS

UChicago Impact, a nonprofit organization within the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute (UEI), is working to better support students and teachers in bilingual education programs focused on fostering Spanish literacy proficiency.

UChicago Impact works with school districts and charter networks nationwide to get more students on track to reading proficiency through its Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress (STEP) system. STEP is a research-based formative assessment system designed to build teacher capacity for literacy instruction and provide educators with the data and professional learning necessary to improve student achievement in literacy across grade levels.

STEP currently supports approximately 3,000 teachers and 110,000 students across 270 schools and 31 states. Based on the original STEP validation study (2005), students who achieve STEP 12 by the end of third grade have an 86 percent chance of meeting or exceeding state standards.

To support educators working to foster Spanish literary proficiency, UChicago Impact is developing STEP Español. Like STEP, STEP Español is a research-based formative assessment system. It is designed to identify students' reading abilities and areas of need in reading and communicating about their comprehension of text in Spanish. Unlike other Spanish literacy assessments, STEP Español is not a translation of its English counterpart. While there are similarities in best practices for English instruction and Spanish instruction, there are specific Spanish literacy milestones that do not have parallels in English literacy instruction. For example, developmental spelling, decoding, and phonemic awareness — all critical reading milestones — progress more rapidly and earlier on in the reading trajectory for Spanish. Also, in Spanish, segmenting words into syllables is the most important skill in emergent literacy and is the strongest predictor of long term reading success. In English, the role of syllabication — dividing words into syllables — does not carry the same predictive weight and it is emphasized later in the developmental trajectory.

The design of the STEP Español assessment and accompanying professional learning supports is taking such differences into consideration. STEP Español will measure students' abilities against the critical reading milestones that need to be met to achieve proficiency in Spanish, specifically. It is designed to inform teachers about student progression against the Spanish literacy skills necessary to build a strong foundation for more advanced literacy development. STEP Español's "Construir y Estabilizar Serie" will support students and teachers in grades K-3, just as English STEP's Construct & Stabilize Series does. The Construir y Estabilizar Serie will support teachers in establishing foundational literacy and comprehension skills through the use of both fiction and non-fiction texts.

UChicago Impact and the STEP Español team of researchers and practitioners look forward to contributing to the growing body of knowledge on and tools for bilingual assessment in the coming years.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

The growing [body of research on effective dual language programs](#) is encouraging more states across the nation to implement [The Seal of Biliteracy](#), a designation given to students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation. The Seal of Biliteracy is placed on recipients' transcripts or diplomas and serves as evidence of bilingual proficiency for future employers and college admissions officers. Currently, 35 states and Washington D.C. have approved a statewide Seal of Biliteracy,⁹ while schools in at least 40 states operate dual-language programs. New York city alone has more than 100 [dual-language programs](#)¹⁰ and Washington D.C. is [quickly expanding the number of these programs](#) in their schools.¹¹

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/2018-new-knowledge-report>

SOURCES

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