



Understanding English Learner Growth and Reclassification Trends in an Urban Public School District

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Introduction

English Learners (ELs) make up a growing share of public-school students in urban districts across the U.S., yet many remain classified as ELs for seven or more years, becoming Long-Term English Learners (LTELs). LTEL status is associated with lower academic achievement (Umansky 16) and poorer long-term outcomes (Johnson 19). Reclassification (RFEP) signals English proficiency, giving students access to broader opportunities—but many students have been plateauing or declining in language acquisition by the performance on standardized exams. This project investigates what student characteristics predict Long-term English Learners status and test score growth.

Research Questions

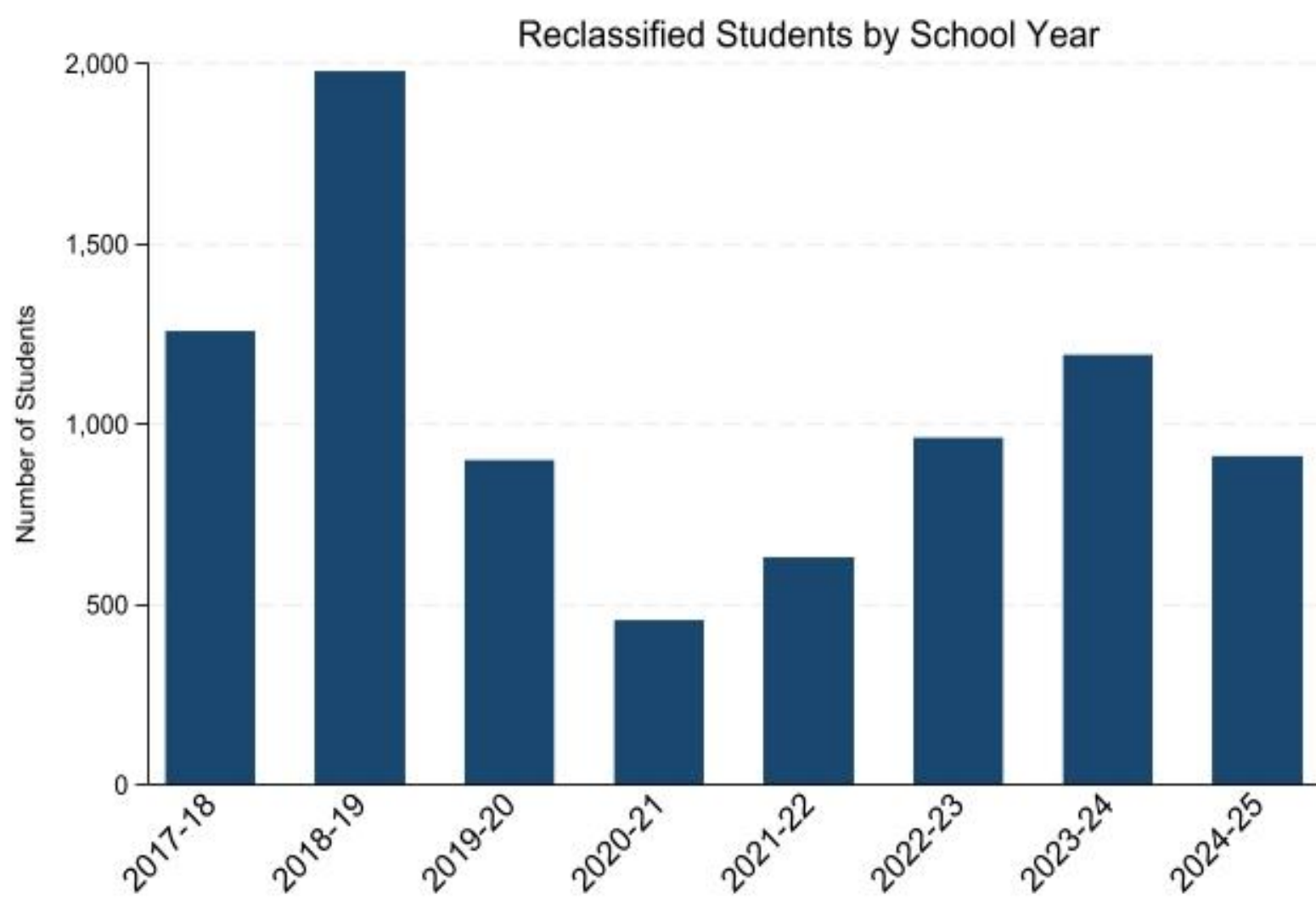
- ❖ What are the student characteristics associated with growth vs. plateau/decline in English language acquisition?
- ❖ What student characteristics are associated with the likelihood of an English learner becoming a long-term English learner?

Data

- ❖ **Source:** Student-level panel data from a large urban school district
- ❖ **Years Covered:** 2017-18 to 2024-2025 academic years
- ❖ **Sample Size:** ~150,000 unique students
- ❖ **Data:**
 - ❖ Standardized ELL assessment scores
 - ❖ Reclassification dates (RFEP), EL Status Information
 - ❖ Demographic data (Race/Ethnicity, Primary Language, FRL, SPED)
 - ❖ Enrollment and school-level identifiers
- ❖ **Longitudinal Structure:** Panel data sorted by student ID and academic year to track language proficiency over time

Summary Statistics & Figures

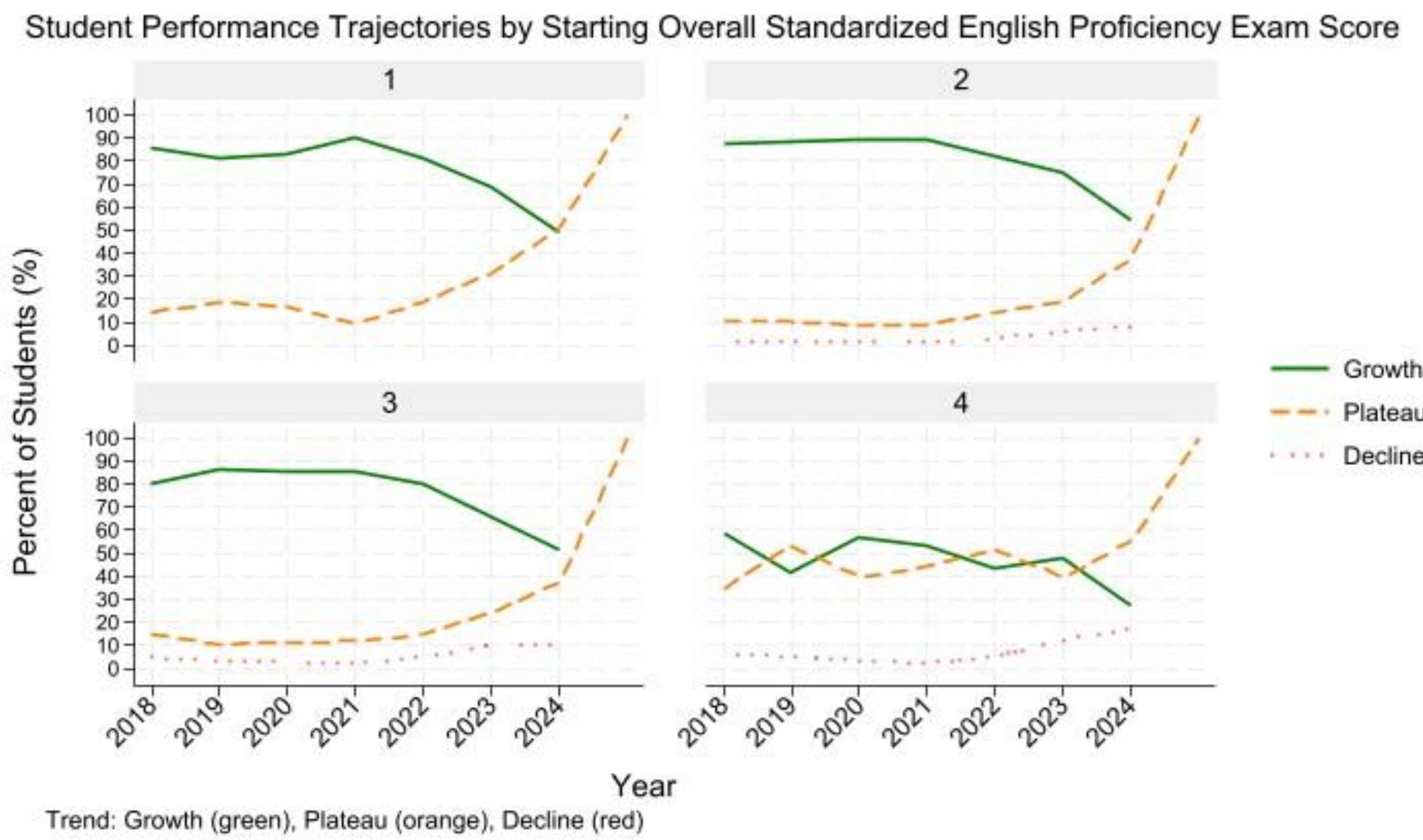
- ❖ **Student Demographics & Context**
 - ❖ **Racial Demographics**
 - ❖ 47% Hispanic/Latino
 - ❖ 20% Black/African American
 - ❖ 13% Asian
 - ❖ 10% White
 - ❖ 7% Mixed Race / Native American / Pacific Islander
 - ❖ **Gender Demographics**
 - ❖ 48% Female
 - ❖ 52% Male
 - ❖ **Special Education**
 - ❖ 6,000 students receive Special Education services, which is about 13% of the student population
- ❖ **English Learner (EL) Statistics**
 - ❖ **Average time in district (EL students):** ~3.1 years
 - ❖ **EL enrollment per year:** ~13,000 students (~27.8% of total students)
 - ❖ **Long-Term English Learners (LTELs) per year:** ~2,814 students (~6%)



Methods

- We ran three **linear probability models** to examine student characteristics associated with:
- ❖ **Long-Term English Learner (LTEL) status**
 - ❖ **Standardized Exam Growth and Growth with Lag Test Score**
- ❖ All models included student fixed effects to account for time-invariant, unobserved student characteristics (e.g., motivation, home environment).
 - ❖ Covariates included race/ethnicity, gender, home language, FRL eligibility, and special education status.
 - ❖ The dependent variables were binary indicators (e.g., ltel = 1 if a student was a long-term English learner, and 0 if not), allowing coefficients to be interpreted as percentage point changes in probability.
 - ❖ Robust standard errors were clustered by student ID to adjust for repeated observations.

Fig. 1

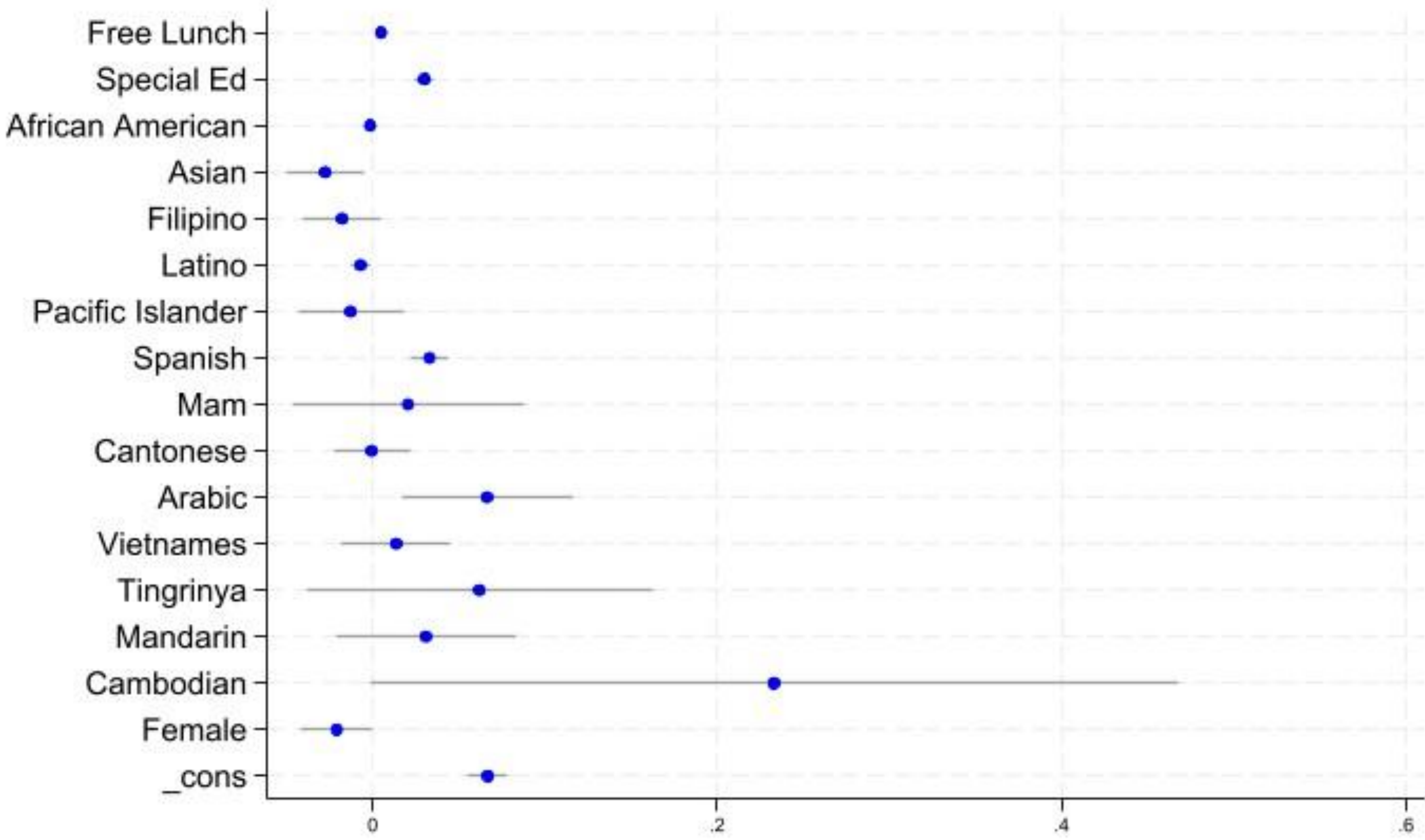


This graph tracks EL students' progress over time based on their first observed score (Levels 1–4).

- ❖ Many **students showed growth** in English proficiency regardless of their starting level.
- ❖ For example, over **80% of students** who started at Level 1 in earlier years improved over time.
- ❖ Starting in **2023–2024**, the share of students whose scores **plateaued** (remained flat) increased across all levels—most notably among those starting at **Levels 1–3**. This may reflect **post-pandemic learning disruptions** or challenges in maintaining progress after initial gains.

Preliminary Results

- ❖ **Predictors of Growth in Scores**
 - ❖ Prior performance strongly predicts future growth:
 - ❖ A **1-point increase in lagged score level** is associated with **–41 percentage points** lower growth.
 - ❖ This suggests that **students with lower starting scores grow the most**, reflecting catch-up growth.
 - ❖ **Socioeconomic status:**
 - ❖ Students eligible for **Free/Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL)** consistently show **higher growth**:
 - ❖ **+17 percentage points** (with lag)
 - ❖ **+11 percentage points** (without lag)
 - ❖ Indicates that **low-income students are making substantial progress** over time.
 - ❖ **Special education:**
 - ❖ **+3.5 percentage points** (with lag, $p = 0.028$)
 - ❖ **+2.8 percentage points** (without lag, $p = 0.09$)
 - ❖ Modest positive association, statistically significant in the lag model.
 - ❖ **Race/Ethnicity:**
 - ❖ **African American students** show **–33 percentage points** lower growth (*significant only in model without lag*).
 - ❖ **Asian and Filipino students** show **10–32 percentage points lower growth**, significant in the lag model only.
 - ❖ **Language background:**
 - ❖ **Khmer-speaking students** consistently show **exceptionally high growth**:
 - ❖ **+97 percentage points** in both models ($p < 0.001$).
 - ❖ Students with a non-top ten primary language show **+41 percentage points** growth in the lag model ($p < 0.001$).
 - ❖ Other language groups (e.g., **Spanish, Vietnamese, Mam**) show **lower growth**, but results are mostly **not statistically significant**
- ❖ **Predictors of LTEL (Long-Term English Learner) Status**
 - ❖ **Low-income (FRL) students** are **more likely** to become LTELs (**+0.5 pp**, $p < 0.001$).
 - ❖ **Special education students** face a **+3 pp** higher likelihood of becoming LTELs ($p < 0.001$).
 - ❖ **Spanish (+3.3 pp)**, **Arabic (+6.7 pp)**, and **Khmer (+23 pp)** speakers are more likely to be LTELs (all significant or marginally significant).
 - ❖ **Asian (–2.7 pp)** and **Latino (–0.8 pp)** students are **less likely** to become LTELs ($p < 0.05$).
 - ❖ **Female students** are **2.1 pp less likely** to be LTELs ($p = 0.049$).
 - ❖ No significant differences for African American, Filipino, or most other language groups.



Coefficient Plot from the LTEL Regression

Discussion

These preliminary findings reveal that a substantial portion of English Learners (ELs) do not experience consistent growth in English proficiency over time. Economic disadvantage, measured by eligibility for free/reduced lunch, is associated with both While Khmer speakers and those with less common languages show notable growth, Spanish and Arabic speakers are more likely to remain ELs long term. Gender and racial differences—such as lower LTEL risk for female and Latino students and lower growth among African American students—highlight how EL outcomes are shaped by intersecting factors. higher growth and a higher likelihood of becoming LTEL—highlighting systemic barriers that persist despite progress. Special education status is also a strong predictor of LTEL risk.

Acknowledgements

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