Racial Justice in Multilingual Education

2025
Volume 1, Issue 1

A Mismatch: From Monolingual Labels to Multilingual Dreams

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Abstract

As of 2024, more than one million students in California were classified as English Learners (ELs), with nearly 200,000 labeled as Long-Term English Learners (LTELs). This paper offers a collaborative counterstory authored by a multilingual youth labeled as an LTEL and an education scholar. The youth's narrative—told through prose, poetry, and lived reflection—challenges deficit-oriented views of multilingual youth and reveals the contradictions of standardized assessments that categorize them as "not yet proficient," despite their multilingual fluency. Drawing on critical race theory and a desire-based framework, this work resists damage-centered accounts of LTELs by centering multilingual youths' agency, dreams, and critical insights about their educational trajectories. In doing so, it underscores how raciolinguistic ideologies shape the labeling of racialized multilingual students while simultaneously obscuring their strengths. The paper invites educators, policymakers, and researchers to reimagine assessment and labeling practices in ways that frame multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit to overcome.

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.58117/524c-wt60

Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore…. Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness.

— Eve Tuck, *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*

I'm very proud of myself right now, and who I am and who I'm gonna be, and what my goals are… I feel like I'm very lucky to understand myself, like through my little strings… As if there were trees. And I'm just walking through them and bending them

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as I want to… They're tied strong enough to hold and not move, and to be straight, but bendy enough for me to just squeeze however I want to.

— Hosna, 17 years old, multilingual, labeled long-term English learner, *Interview, June 27, 2024*

From Labels to Lived Experiences: Centering Youth Voice in Education

This is the story of Hosna, a 17-year-old multilingual Iranian high school student in California, who is labeled as a "long-term English learner" (LTEL). She speaks English and Persian and knows some Spanish, Japanese, and American Sign Language. Hosna moved to the U.S. at the age of five. She had already been exposed to English back in Iran through her father, who was proficient in English, having previously lived in the U.S. Yet she was considered for ESL (English as a Second Language) services when she entered kindergarten because her parents mentioned speaking a non-English language on the Home Language Survey (HLS), completed at school enrollment. She was subject to English proficiency tests shortly after and was designated as an EL, a label she has retained ever since, despite her family opting out of ESL services.

In 2021, Californians Together, a coalition of education, civil rights, family, community, and advocacy organizations, published a report that put forth multiple recommendations to improve inequities for LTELs through policy and practice, including "Frequent communication and meaningful engagement centered on listening and learning with students, their families, and communities to create relationships of trust" (Buenrostro & Maxwell-Jolly, 2021, p.11). Hosna is among those students we often hear *about* in research, policy, and practice, but we rarely listen to them. English Learners are "overresearched yet, ironically, made invisible" (Tuck, 2009, pp. 411-412). As Brooks (2022) underscores, "It is deemed unnecessary to communicate with EL-identified youth (much less receive their consent or assent) about decisions that are made on their behalf" (p. 1219). Even labeling them with pejorative terms such as 'long-term English learner' signals their passive and failing role in their learning process. Instead, they should be viewed as "veterans of the EL system" and "knowledgeable participants" (Brooks, 2022, p. 1237). Hosna's deep understanding of the language education policies and their impact on her journey challenges adultism in understanding the English learners' experiences, "the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement" (Bell, 2010, p. 540).

In addition to countering the ironic invisibility of multilingual youths' voices, we also aim to challenge damage-centered reporting, which primarily focuses on the harms of an English-only education system. We understand that advocates' focus on achievement gaps and educational harms is a response to a damage-centered political system that is only alerted when something is wrong. But we want to try something

different here to "quicken and engage conscience… and stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414). Here, we lead with a desire-based *counterstory* of Hosna, a multifaceted and ambitious multilingual high school student in California, as an antidote to damage-centered research.

Counterstory is a tool for "exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform." (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). However, our counterstory does more than challenge the majoritarian story of long-term English learners. We tell a story of surviving and thriving despite racial and linguistic oppression. In our desire-based framing, we are concerned with "understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Therefore, we listen to Hosna's lived experiences—told through prose and poetry—as she recounts her educational experiences with a label that contradicts her capabilities, dreams, and ambitions. Deepening the irony, she also reflects on her encounters with raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), which frame racialized speakers as linguistically deficient regardless of their fluency, rendering it unfathomable for her to speak with an American accent while being fluent in a language historically stigmatized in this country.

Hosna's Story: The Irony of Being a Long-term English Learner

Why is it so unbelievable that I, as an Iranian-born American citizen who has been designated as a long-term English learner, want to become a professor of creative writing and literature? I was born in 2007 in Iran. Since my father was a U.S. citizen, my sisters and I were approved for our Green Cards at a young age. My father and two older sisters moved to the U.S. when I was four. I stayed with my mother another year until I was five so she could get her Green Card. After my mother and I arrived in America, while getting me enrolled in school, we informed them that my first language was Farsi. I was placed into a class to learn better English, and I didn't realize that would change my learning experience as a student in America.

On the first day of kindergarten, I hid behind my mother's legs, peeking out from the side, scared to communicate with my classmates. My peers would speak to me in English, and I'd understand them, but I'd respond in Farsi. By the end of the year, I had to repeat kindergarten since I couldn't speak *proper* English. Shortly after, I would get pulled out of class in elementary school to do one-on-one with an adult to speak better. In sixth and seventh grades, I got put into an English Language Development (ELD) class for two back-to-back periods.

I asked my ELD teacher if it was possible to take the English language proficiency exam on paper. She dismissed my voice and disregarded my request. All she cared about was that I passed the exam and tested out, not what would help me do so. Later in 8th grade, I passed the ELPAC (English Language Proficiency Assessment for California) exam with flying colors and met the requirements to get into honors English in high school, yet the educators still had me take it the following year to *make sure* I was English proficient. I had gotten a high enough score to get out of the ELD class, but not high enough to not have to retake the ELPAC.

During my freshman year, I was told I didn't need to take the class and that it wasn't necessary. When I asked why, they said I had tested out of the *class*. I was also put into honors English because I was genuinely interested in learning more than the regular class. What I didn't know was that even though I had tested out of the class, I still had to take the exam. And I did, but they never sent my results. So, I assumed I had passed.

But then again, I had to take the exam in my sophomore year. I guessed on some of the answers. To be honest, I was exhausted from that test. How could I still be taking it after so many years? It's such a thorn in my side! Then something came in the mail. I assumed it was the result, but it wasn't. It was a letter very strongly suggesting I take an ELD class. I was very surprised, same with my parents. My father wrote an email expressing how he was an English teacher for a few years and how the letter was insulting. They then responded by apologizing. I wasn’t put into the ELD class, but I still wonder what would have happened if the letter had been more than a suggestion.

Earlier this year, during my speaking exam, which is performed one-on-one with an educator, I was told that most kids in the grade with English as their first language would fail this exam. I was puzzled by the educator's words because how come I had to take an exam that most people who speak English as their first language would fail? The same thing happened during one of my classes in AP psychology. Just for fun, my teacher decided to give us the tests the recruits had to take during WWI. The Alpha and Beta exams: The Alpha was for those with English as their first language, and the Beta was for illiterate and non-English speakers. We took the Alpha exam first, which was in English and was very easy. The whole class did well as expected. But then we took the Beta, and those had images where we had to fill in the missing object that was not in the image. I'm not going to say it was hard, but it was contradictory since we are conditioned to write full sentences. For perspective, there was a photo of a rabbit without one ear. I stated, “The rabbit's ear is missing from the image,” but the correct answer was: “ear”. The whole class failed the Beta test, and I was surprised, same with my peers who were English proficient. How could a test meant for non-English speakers be harder? Was it made for them to fail?

I have had an American accent since I was 9 years old. Most of the people I speak to think I only speak English, and when I tell them I wasn't born in America and I speak another language, they are very surprised, as if they didn't expect someone who speaks *perfect* English to not be from America. I'm a great communicator, and I have many plans for my senior year of high school and my future. Currently, I'm a high school junior wanting to become a creative writing and literature professor. I've known what I wanted since my first day in kindergarten: to become an educator. I do a lot, I take action in leadership. During my sophomore year, I was vice president of my Show Choir and dance captain. This year, as a junior, I'm president of the Show Choir. I've been in the tech crew in Show Choir since freshman year, I'm vice president of drama, and a dog pound leader. I was also a featured singer in a song called "I Don't Want To," published by my friend, *rjslay3r*. I've won many awards for my acting and singing performances. I love all forms of art, including writing and poetry. Language *is* a form of art. Being labeled as a long-term English learner doesn't impact me in my daily life. An exam shouldn't put a title on me and doesn't determine what I can do. The irony lies in the fact that I am capable of doing what any English monolingual individual can do.

Silence Doesn't Make me Silent

> Silence the mind, silence the body, silence the soul, for it rains.
>
> And no soul unwashed for there is my brain, how it speaks to me and how I respond is no word, no doubt on the thought.
>
> Words and language are not the same nor do they need to be to understand the train, a train that rides the path of life.
>
> I come clean with the voice that is my life. So no secrets no truth unsaid,
>
> My life is my own without a burden or dread.
>
> Let the light be shown and no worries aside I prove myself here and there's no aside to be pushed to no corner to crawl into,
>
> just my voice and the thoughts I bear and the memories that come close and no need to tear.
>
> My life is in my hands and my language my own,
>
> for I also speak the language of truth and it's time for my truth to be shown.
>
> *—Hosna, April 2025*

Who are Long-Term English Learners? What's in a Label?

The state of California identifies Long-term English Learners (LTELs) as,

> An English learner in grades 6-12 who has attended United States schools for six or more years, has remained at the same level of English proficiency for two or more years as determined by the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC) or has regressed to a lower level of English language proficiency, and for students in grades 6-9 inclusive, scores below basic or far below basic on the English language arts standards-based achievement test. (Buenrostro & Maxwell-Jolly, 2021, p. 13).

Some researchers extend this designation further, identifying students as 'LTEL7' once they have remained in EL status for more than seven years (Price et al., 2024). The California Department of Education (2025b) uses the category LTEL6+ to denote students with six or more years of EL status. During the 2024–25 school year, over 1 million (17.4%) of California's 5.8 million students were classified as English Learners (ELs), of whom 198,881 were identified as LTEL6+, a group mainly in grades six and above.

Even when students pass the ELPAC (as Hosna did in 8th grade) and are considered for a "Reclassified as Fluent English Proficient" (RFEP) label, they are monitored for four more years to ensure they can show an overall score of 4 on Summative ELPAC (CA Department of Education, 2025a). As Hosna mentioned, she, unfortunately, did not test out since she scored 3 out of 4 in the following years. Her parents finally decided to opt out of the ELD classes. Yet, per state law, they continue to receive letters (seemingly AI translated in Persian) that tell them their daughter continues to be an EL and encourage them to reconsider ELD classes.

Yalda's Story: Seeing Hosna

Imagine learning English at a young age and becoming so fluent in it that you lose parts of your mother tongue and face challenges communicating with your mother. You master and love English so deeply that you dream of studying its literature in college, sharing it with others through teaching, as well as your gift for literature, writing, and drama. Yet, when you get to high school, you are told your English is still not good enough and that you should be monitored, tested, and labeled as an English Learner (EL) for 10 academic years in a row because 1) you speak a non-English language at home and 2) you cannot perform on a standardized English proficiency test consistently enough to exit out of a system you had little choice entering. At this point, have you failed English, or has the education system failed to recognize your learning beyond one measure of English proficiency?

I met Hosna in 2023 through a community-based Persian language program, where her mother was the lead teacher, and Hosna volunteered to help younger students while learning Persian. She was very social with both adults and children, and she tried to speak Persian to everyone. She seemed wise beyond her age, but I had not really known Hosna until I visited her home almost a year later to interview her and her mother for a research project focused on bilingual Iranian families. Following her choice, we carried the conversation in English, with occasional translanguaging in Persian and English. This allowed her to open up more than she had ever done in the Persian language program. As my notes from that day reflect, "I saw a new side of Hosna coming out of her shell gradually as we went through the interview" (Research memo, June 27, 2024).

Besides my observation, Hosna shared that she was "definitely" more comfortable in English: "Because I'm raised here, and I speak it most of the day—just like most of my life, I just spoke English" (Interview, June 27, 2024). Her affinity with English went beyond just proficiency: "I love English from like in my heart, it has like a place in my heart. And I love writing, and I'm good at it. But people, not everyone sees that. So, that's the only thing" (Interview June 27, 24). Hosna's comfort in English, however, has come at a price. Despite her fluency in Persian, she does not have all the words to fully express herself in Persian. On the other hand, her mother is more comfortable speaking Persian than English. This leads to a "language barrier" and "misunderstanding" between the two of them, especially in heated moments. Still, Hosna considers it essential and a matter of respect to try to communicate with both her parents in Persian. She also acts as a language broker for her mother (Orellana, 2009), translating English in everyday situations, such as during customer service calls. In doing so, she tries to protect her mother from the linguistic racism she frequently witnesses, often triggered by her mother's accent. Hosna tells me that she is comfortable with her current level of language proficiency. She views her languages as oil paint (one of the several art forms she engages in), each standing out yet blending to compose a portrait: "I think that it blends in together. It's that I get my passion for Farsi[1], and I get my logic from English, and I feel like they blend in super smoothly. Like oil paint. Just like together" (Interview, June 27, 24).

Early in the conversation, Hosna shared with me that she used to be harassed at school when she was younger and wore the hijab. She chose to give it up a few years later because she preferred to keep her faith private, particularly as it led to harassment. I asked her if there were other ways she had been mistreated for who

[1] In this paper, we use Persian and Farsi interchangeably to refer to Hosna's mother tongue.

she was. She answered yes, with conviction, but her answer surprised me. She broke down her entire experience in ELD classes and the equity issues related to standardized assessment in under 2 minutes. This is the first time I learned that Hosna was an EL:

> I still definitely do (get mistreated), because there's, like, a learning education called ELD [I nod and say I know it]. Okay. Yeah. Right. You know it, obviously. But what is it? They base it on a test, yes, which I've been taking since I was in elementary school, and I still take it, like, every year, and they're talking about putting me in there because I couldn't do the reading test, like I was on the verge of failing. And they're like, 'Oh, we have to put her in, like, as a precaution.' And I'm like, I don't understand that because I could…. I find that very ironic because I want to be a literature professor, major in English, and listen, like, I don't. I find that so irritable, but I can't wrap my head around it…. It's hard for me to focus at times or many times throughout the day. And that was a part of it in my eyes. I just couldn't just sit down and just read eight paragraphs for like four hours and just like, do it, you know? Yeah, which I hate it so much, but I'm like, I don't think a test should define whether or not I could read properly or, like, speak properly or not. But I feel like some things, even today, are because we've been teaching in the same way that we have in the 18th century and whatnot. Some things need to change. Like we develop, we change. Why can't our teachings also be that?

That is when I knew Hosna had to tell her own story as *she* experienced it.

As Hosna's story and critical analysis demonstrate, the labels assigned through standardized assessments of English proficiency should not be taken as unbiased or objective measures. Hosna's earlier reference to the Alpha and Beta tests to highlight the absurdity of using the ELPAC—the test that, by her teacher's admission, most native English speakers would fail—to evaluate her English proficiency is particularly sharp. Admittedly, it took me time and reflection to grasp the depth of this connection beyond the shared inequities of two standardized assessments. Despite their seemingly disparate contexts, these World War I army tests are deeply connected to the modern standardized tests used in the U.S. education system. As Ewing (2025) argues, the Alpha and Beta tests were "the first real standardized tests" (p. 122), administered in 1917 during World War I by a committee led by the president of the American Psychological Association (APA) to evaluate the mental competence of army recruits. Yet, as Hosna also alludes, the questions were socially, culturally, and linguistically biased. Just three years after their implementation, the army tests laid the foundation for the National Intelligence Test, designed to evaluate and classify school students based on their intellectual abilities. Subsequently, in 1926, a psychologist who had assisted in administering the Army Alpha tests developed the

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which is still used to measure students' intelligence and aptitude for college admissions. Beyond laying the groundwork for today's standardized tests in the U.S., these assessments were often designed and used to mask systemic racial, cultural, and linguistic inequities as failures of the test-takers under the guise of "objective" measures of aptitude. In doing so, they served to pathologize racially, linguistically, and ethnically minoritized groups and to reinforce racial hierarchies.

Today, standardized English proficiency assessments such as the ELPAC often reduce bi/multilingual students' linguistic capabilities to their English proficiency alone, through deficit-oriented labels such as "English Learner" and "Long-term English Learner." Given that most ELs in California and the U.S. at large are racialized and minoritized, these assessments, which are designed to compare bilingual students' English proficiency to English monolinguals, must be viewed as "ideological perceptions rather than measurements of empirical linguistic practices" (Rosa, 2016, p.172). Naming bi/multilingual youth with labels such as "long-term English learners," "non-non," or "semi-lingual" signals a lens of perpetual incompleteness, or as Rosa (2016) calls it, "racialized ideologies of languagelessness." By this definition, language practices of racialized and minoritized bi/multilingual youth are often perceived as illegitimate, not because of their proficiency, but due to the embodied view of these youths as othered language speakers (Kaveh, 2023). Besides race, the systemic marginalization of bilingual students by standardized English assessments also intersects with disability, excluding bilingual students with disabilities from inclusive educational settings that address all their needs (Cioè-Peña, 2017, 2020). Demonstrating this disparity, in California, long-term English learners of seven or more years (i.e., LTEL7s) are 2.5 times more likely to be identified with special education needs than those who are former ELs (Price et al., 2024).

Over the past 15 years, California has taken steps to address the inequities and harms inflicted on LTELs, partly rooted in the legacy of English-only legislation, Proposition 227 (1998). In 2010, Californians Together issued "a wake-up call" about LTELs, who comprised nearly 60% of ELs in secondary grades in the state at the time and lagged in academic achievement (Olsen, 2010, p. iii). Olsen called the harm subjected to ELs "reparable harm" and claimed that the state, districts, and schools have the power to change it. A decade later, a new report by Californians Together shows that while there has been a slight decline in the number of LTELs in grades 6-12 in California (from 52% to 46%), the number of ELs in grades 6-12 with the risk of becoming LTELs has increased by two percent (Buenrostro & Maxwell-Jolly, 2021). Additionally, the report shows that despite improvements for ELs and LTELs, other groups of students have shown greater improvements. Therefore, the gap has continuously widened for students labeled ELs and LTELs.

Notably, California has a new multilingual initiative called "Global California 2023", which aims to have 50% of K–12 students become bilingual or multilingual by 2030, increasing to 75% by 2040. In this vision, "closing the achievement gap for English learners requires schools to value and build upon the knowledge and skills English learners have in their home languages that can support the development of English proficiency" (California Department of Education, 2019, p. 5). The state claims to view ELs as "assets to our state and their local communities. Like all students, they bring a rich cultural and linguistic heritage to our classrooms, making our schools more vibrant and diverse" (California Department of Education, 2019, p. 6). Yet, the initiative makes no mention of long-term English learners such as Hosna—most of whom are already bi/multilingual—nor does it address the English proficiency measures that may be gatekeeping them from this promising multilingual education vision. This omission begs the question: Where are they? These "long-term English learners" in California's multilingual vision.

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