

English Language Proficiency Assessment in the Nation:

CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE PRACTICE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Because a growing number of public school students in the United States are English language learners (ELL), we must understand better the issues concerning instruction, assessment and classification of ELL students. Without adequate, uniform and reliable methods for identifying and serving these students, the fastest growing student population in the country, we perpetuate their struggle in school and beyond.

Recognizing the urgency of this matter, the federal government, with 2001's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, mandated yearly assessment of English Language Proficiency (ELP) for all ELL students in the nation and demanded states to use reliable and valid assessment. This report presents a national view of the ELP assessments that existed prior to the implementation of NCLB and those created after, some of which were supported by the U.S. Department of Education.

The Need

Between 1990 and 1997, the number of United States residents born outside the country increased by 30 percent, from 19.8 million to 25.8 million. According to a recent report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, approximately five million ELL students were enrolled in schools, representing an estimated 10 percent of all public school students. The numbers are even greater today.

One of the greatest influences on ELL students' academic careers is their level of proficiency in English, given that they are primarily instructed and assessed in English. However, assessments of English language proficiency based on questionable measures may cause grave academic consequences for ELL students.

Assessment impacts ELL students' academic lives in many different ways. In the classroom, assessment of ELL students affects planning of their curriculum and instruction. In particular, ELP assessment plays a major part in the classification and grouping of ELL students. A student's level of English proficiency serves as the most important criteria for the classification that determines their level of proficiency in English and guides the prescription of any needed instruction and instructional materials.

Goals of the Legislation

The goal of NCLB Title III legislation was to provide reliable and valid assessment of ELL students' level of proficiency in English. In addition to emphasizing the need for English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment, the Title III legislation provides a set of guidelines for constructing ELP assessments that render reliable and valid estimates of a student's level of English proficiency.

Before the mandates outlined in the NCLB Title III legislation, states used a variety of commercially available ELP tests. In fact, some states continue to use these tests. Unfortunately, many of these tests don't meet the requirements as set forth by NCLB. These include measuring proficiency in four domains

(reading, writing, speaking, and listening), measuring student's academic English proficiency, and aligning the tests with the states' ELP standards. By introducing the concept of academic English and academic content into ELP assessments, NCLB requires states to measure ELL students' academic success more directly.

These are significant milestones in the history of ELP assessment. By assessing academic language proficiency, states more thoroughly address language needs related to academic success. Alignment of ELP assessment content with the states' ELP content standards provides more authentic assessments that are relevant to students' academic needs. Other requirements, such as evidence on the reliability and validity of assessments and introducing the concept of grade clusters also contribute to improved assessment of English language proficiency.

Status of Testing Nationwide

In response to the NCLB mandate, the U.S. Department of Education provided support to states for developing reliable and valid ELP assessments through the Enhanced Assessment Grant under Section 6112b of the NCLB Act. Four different consortia of states have been developed and are implementing ELP assessments that attempt to address Title III assessment requirements. The remaining entities are using either their own state-developed tests or some version of commercially available assessments, augmented or off-the-shelf.

In addition to the four consortia of states, several test publishers have been engaged in major efforts to develop assessments that are consistent with the requirements set forth by the NCLB Title III accountability mandate. These publishers significantly upgraded their existing ELP tests or created new ELP tests that are in line with the NCLB Title III requirements.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, we present an overview of the ELP assessments and discuss some shortcomings of the assessments developed before the implementation of NCLB. To promote understanding of the conceptual basis of these tests and how these tests differ, Chapter 2, presents principles underlying English language proficiency tests. Chapters 3 through 6 report the process for development and validation of the four newly constructed ELP batteries created by the four consortia of states. Each of these chapters introduces a consortium, outlines how states' content coverage and ELP standards were used as a base for test-item development, describes the test blueprint process, summarizes the process used for test development, and discusses pilot and/or field testing of test items.

Chapter 7 presents information on the commonly used ELP tests that existed prior to the implementation of NCLB, some of which are being used by states for Title III reporting purposes. The summaries include: (a) test description, (b) test content, (c) scoring and standard setting (d) alignment to state standards, and (d) any technical/psychometric information (reliability, validity, item-level data) to the extent available. Chapter 8 discusses methods and research findings on the development and implementation of Title III Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAO) policies and systems for California, a state which serves about a third of the nation's ELL population. An overall summary and discussion of this report is presented in Chapter 9, along with recommendations for states to make optimal use of their NCLB Title III assessments.

Purpose and Recommendations

The purpose of this report is to present facts about existing and newly developed assessments. We have no intention of evaluating the quality of existing and newly developed ELP assessments or criticizing

any of these tests, whether they were developed prior to NCLB or after the law was implemented. Many of the existing ELP assessments have provided valid assessments for ELL students in the past.

In addition to the four consortia of states, major test publishers also developed ELP tests based on the NCLB Title III requirements. Among them are LAS Link and Stanford English Language Proficiency (SELP) assessments. These tests also look promising. Future research will better judge the quality of the newly developed ELP assessments including those developed by the consortia of states and those prepared by the test publishers.

The following recommendations are based on the information presented in different chapters of this report as well as the review of existing literature on the English language proficiency assessments:

- Examine the comparability of the ELP assessment used to establish the baseline with the newly adopted ELP assessment.
- Examine the content of your state-adopted ELP assessment and align the content with the state ELP content standards.
- Make sure that the ELP assessment items do not differentially or unfairly perform across the subgroups within the ELL population.
- Use multiple criteria for assessing ELL students' level of English proficiency, particularly with high-stakes decisions such as classification or re-classification of students.
- Use ELP assessment results along with other sources to make informed decisions about ELL student participation in Title I assessment.
- Incorporate a major measurement research component into your programs that can be supervised and run with your professionally trained staff.
- Implement field testing procedures and replenish their item banks and operational test forms on a regular basis so that they do not over-expose current items, tasks, and test forms.
- Conduct ongoing reviews of the alignment of items and assessment tasks with ELP standards and the psychometric characteristics of the item banks and test forms.
- Plan and implement validity studies on an ongoing basis to examine current issues in assessing English language learners and ELP assessments that were discussed in this report.

Fairness demands increased efforts toward improving the quality of assessments for English language learners, especially in light of the performance gap between these students and their native English-speaking peers. Inadequacies in the assessment and instruction of ELL students may partly explain such gaps, so fair assessment is a priority. These issues raise important equity considerations, especially as the population of ELL students increases rapidly. Our hope is that this report will contribute positively to a better understanding of their needs and how we can best serve them.