

Five Questions to Consider When Reviewing Assessment Data for English Learners



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Five Questions to Consider When Reviewing Assessment Data for English Learners

English learners (ELs)¹ are simultaneously developing their English language, academic language, and content knowledge, while balancing cultural differences in U.S. schools. Thus, when using assessment data to plan instruction for ELs, considering the context of their learning, as well as multiple forms of data related to both academics and English language development, is essential. As with any student, when an EL receives [intensive intervention with data-based individualization \(DBI\)](#), educators should collect and review student data to select an intervention, determine whether the student is making adequate progress, and plan adaptations to the intervention if the student's progress is not adequate. At the same time, identifying assessment tools with evidence of reliability and validity for assessing ELs in literacy and mathematics can be a challenging task. This document addresses five guiding questions for educators to consider when reviewing and interpreting assessment data for ELs and includes links to selected resources to support educators.

1. What does a home language survey tell us about the student's native language development?

When an EL registers for school, district personnel should conduct a home language survey (see [Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs](#) for more information about home language surveys). Part of this survey will include questions about the language(s) spoken in the home and the student's formal education in the native language. Learning this background information from the family will help educators better understand and interpret the student's language development in the native language. The district or school may also identify additional assessments that may be needed to better understand the student's native language development. Educators may use this information about the student's native language development to inform core instruction, prioritize intervention needs, plan appropriate assessment, and determine how to intensify interventions when needed.

RELATED RESOURCE

[“Tools and Resources for Identifying All English Learners.”](#) This resource from the U.S. Department of Education helps break down the process of conducting a home language survey. This resource is the first chapter in the [English Learner Toolkit](#).

2. What do informal assessments tell us about the student's prior education?

Many ELs in the United States today may have had inconsistent educational backgrounds (Potochnick, 2018). Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) may have experienced disruptions in their education for several reasons, including political, environmental, and economic uncertainties. They might be part of a refugee or migrant community. Whatever the reasons, a student's prior interrupted formal education may impact their achievement and progress. Informal interviews with the family and student provide a fuller picture of the student's educational background and can help answer some questions and provide context when a student is not progressing as expected. Knowing if the student experienced limited

¹ This brief uses the term *ELs* to refer to English learners who are emerging English users because the U.S. Department of Education currently uses the term *EL*.

opportunities to learn or trauma in the transition to the United States will help the school team plan and evaluate appropriate supports to ensure the student can access and benefit from instruction.

RELATED RESOURCE

[*Understanding and Supporting Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education \(SLIFE\) in Massachusetts: A Review of the Literature*](#). This literature review describes characteristics of SLIFE, tools for instructional practices, and tools for supporting socioemotional needs of SLIFE. Most importantly, this report reviews state-by-state policies, protocols for identifying SLIFE, and resources that are currently available for assessing and assisting families. Many states now have SLIFE support handbooks. Use the links in this report to find state-specific information to support SLIFE where you work.

3. What does an English language proficiency assessment tell us about the student's current level of language development?

Each year, school districts are required to administer a valid and reliable English language proficiency (ELP) assessment to all ELs in reading, writing, listening, and speaking that aligns to ELP standards. In cases where progress is insufficient, examining these data will help educators determine whether a student's lack of progress may be related to English language development. Although not all states use the same ELP assessment, 36 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia now use the WIDA ACCESS test as the tool for assessing ELP. WIDA has developed many guides to assist educators with understanding student data from the WIDA ACCESS test. (WIDA, 2020)

RELATED RESOURCE

[*WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition*](#). This resource provides the language development standards for ELs, along with information to help build educators' knowledge of language development.

4. How can we interpret the student's language proficiency assessment scores and use this knowledge for instruction?

After an educator examines a student's language proficiency scores, it is important to *interpret* these scores and apply that knowledge to instruction. WIDA's resources are helpful to educators, particularly if WIDA ACCESS is the state-identified assessment tool but also for educators in states using similarly aligned tools. Understanding the nuances of a student's language proficiency scores from 1 to 6 and from *Emerging* to *Reaching* can help inform instruction and adaptations to a validated intervention program. For educators, knowing what an EL *can do* at a particular level of language proficiency and what the EL is building to for the next level is useful information.

RELATED RESOURCE

WIDA ACCESS [*Interpretive Guide for Score Reports*](#). This document helps to guide instruction and adaptations by helping educators understand and interpret ELs' language proficiency scores and the [*Can Do Descriptors*](#) that explain what ELs can do with language at various levels of proficiency.

5. What should I consider when selecting and using screening or progress monitoring assessments for ELs?

Using universal screening and progress-monitoring assessment tools to determine risk status and assess student progress with ELs requires additional investigation to understand the full context of the learner's English language development. Look to the publisher and other resources, such as the [National Center on Intensive Intervention \(NCII\) Tools Chart](#), when choosing tools to determine if the assessments have evidence of validity and reliability for use with ELs. Many publishers do not have these data for their assessments. In those cases, using multiple data sources to verify assessment results and promote accurate decision making is critical. Multiple forms of data may include data related to language development and academic performance.

When a student is not making desired progress, it is important for educators to make timely and appropriate adjustments to the student's instructional program. When interpreting progress-monitoring data, look to the student's true peers to see their pattern of performance and if they have had success within the chosen intervention. *True peers* are defined as students who have the same or similar levels of language proficiency, acculturation, and educational backgrounds (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Brown & Sanford, 2011). Using true peers as a comparison requires collection of detailed information that is not ordinarily part of progress monitoring with English-only students.

RELATED RESOURCE

[Effective Practices for English Learners, Brief 2, Assessment and Data-Based Decision-Making](#). This brief explains how progress monitoring can help determine whether ELs have had effective instruction and opportunity to learn or whether a student may have learning difficulties. These considerations include the quantity and quality of both language and content instruction. This brief presents keys to data-based decision making, help for data reviews, and criteria and decision rules for identifying students at risk for academic failure.

DID YOU KNOW?

True peer comparisons are conducted using achievement data scores based on the following three true peer qualities: native language proficiency, English language proficiency level, and time in current school or academic program with a minimum of three to five students. When using true peers for interpreting progress for the identified EL, the educator would collect data for that student as well as for the student's true peers and then compare progress. Likewise, if an entire group of students with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds is struggling to make progress, intensified instruction with additional language development scaffolds is needed for the whole group to ensure they make adequate progress. (Brown & Sanford, 2011)

Conclusion

Given the challenges associated with conducting valid and reliable assessment for ELs, educators need to become adept at using and interpreting multiple forms of data that comprehensively examine students' native and English language development, academic progress, and prior backgrounds. Understanding the complex nature of ELs' assets and learning progression, which includes language development, as well as academic progress, is a critical step in closing educational gaps for ELs. Additional recommendations for implementing DBI for ELs can be found in the brief [Implementing Data-Based Individualization for English Learners](#) and on the NCII webpage [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity: Considerations for English Learners](#).

More Resources

[Multitiered System of Supports for English Learners](http://mtss4els.org) (mtss4els.org). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, funded Model Demonstration Research projects in a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) for ELs. Through the work of these projects, 10 briefs related to MTSS, assessment, and instruction for ELs were produced. Find these briefs and other useful resources on the website.

[Meeting the Needs of English Learners With and Without Disabilities, Brief 3, English Learners With Significant Learning Difficulties or Disabilities: Recommendations for Practice](#). This brief outlines a culturally and linguistically responsive MTSS framework that focuses specifically on ELs with significant learning difficulties or disabilities. This brief also provides practical examples of language considerations for data-based decision making and includes sample prompts to use during data meetings.

[PLUSS Framework for Instructional/Intervention Enhancement: Observation Rubric](#). Project LEE is one of the demonstration projects from this website. The Project LEE website includes additional tools to align appropriate adaptations to instruction. [Meeting the Needs of English Learners With and Without Disabilities, Brief 2, Evidence-Based Tier 2 Intervention Practices for English Learners](#) provides oral language assessments and instructional tips, as well as Project LEE's PLUSS Framework for using scaffolds for language instruction for ELs in all tiers of instruction. These recommendations can be applied as adaptations for ELs if language scaffolds are not in place.

DID YOU KNOW?

[Indicadores Dinámicos del Éxito en la Lectura \(IDEL\) Materials](#) is a Spanish language tool that measures early literacy skills of children learning to read in Spanish, and it aligns with DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). The tool is not a direct translation of the DIBELS measures but similarly measures phonology, orthography, and syntax in Spanish.

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