

Alignment Is an Equity Issue for Students Acquiring English in U.S. Schools

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In U.S. public schools, students designated as English learners (EL), with their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, are the fastest-growing subgroup of the total kindergarten through twelfth-grade population. Yet as this population has grown, the reported differences in academic achievement between the EL student population and the wider student population have persisted. The reasons for these differences are many and complex, but to fundamentally support equitable education and address EL students' educational rights and needs, alignment among academic standards, assessments, and instruction is key.

The federal government, in fact, has been implementing a formal evaluation of each state's assessment system known as "Peer Review" to ensure that states set appropriate academic content and English language proficiency (ELP) standards and align their assessments to these standards. Yet, little research is available on how to evaluate such an ordered relationship among ELP standards, academic content standards, assessment, and instruction, which has a substantial impact on the equitable education of EL students. We aimed to provide research-based guidance for states, assessment developers, and other researchers involved in the evaluation of alignment for ELP assessments and their related standards. Without appropriate alignment, assessment cannot be effective.

English Learners Standards and Assessments

In order to have a coherent set of expectations and guidelines for teaching and supporting EL students, all states set standards for proficiency in English. These standards define what English language skills and knowledge can be expected at progressive levels of English acquisition. It is important to note that ELP standards are anticipated to reflect the language demands embodied in academic content-area standards (e.g., mathematics, English language arts). This is because instruction based on ELP standards should address language knowledge and skills for EL students to access content learning and achieve academic content standards. Driven by ELP standards, states are mandated to administer statewide ELP assessments to all EL students each year to monitor growth in English proficiency and to make English language services exit decisions so students can be redesignated as Fluent English Proficient.

Given the high-stakes use of ELP assessments, it is critical to investigate whether the assessments are an accurate measure of the essential language knowledge and skills EL students need to meaningfully participate and succeed in academic learning. Any misalignment between ELP standards—what students need to know to participate in academic learning—and ELP assessments—what students are tested on—could result in the mischaracterization of the skills and capacity of EL students, potentially leading to more limited access to academic content and opportunity for students.

Evaluating ELP Alignment

Establishing acceptable alignment between ELP assessments and associated standards is one of the required types of validity evidence for the federal peer review process of states' assessment systems. Whereas the alignment methods and literature on academic content assessments are relatively well-established, little guidance is available on how to evaluate the alignment of ELP assessments to standards in terms of their content match (i.e., overlap in language demands between assessments and standards). From our research, we developed the following recommendations for creating a principled process for analyzing the alignment of language demands between the standards and assessments:

- Identifying the types of language demands (i.e., specific English language knowledge and skills) from standards is a fundamental step to undertake.
- Language demands can be evident at the word, sentence and discourse levels and are forms and features needed to participate in the listening, speaking, reading and writing involved in learning. When analyzing language demands in standards and assessments in terms of language functions (i.e., what the language is being used for) and complexity of language processing skills, these categories are naturally interwoven with cognitive demands (e.g., memory for words, analyzing verbal and visual information, etc.). Language functions and complexity of language processing skills provide fine-grained level of language demands and help determine the cognitive demands of standards and assessments. The evaluation of cognitive complexity may be redundant when the detailed evaluation of language demand is performed.
- Even if a standard was written to a specific language skill or modality (e.g., writing), the standard may implicitly require other modalities (e.g., reading). The exercise of describing standards and documenting required skills in each standard clarified cross-modalities embedded in reading, writing, and speaking/listening standards.
- Focus groups with teachers revealed how general education teachers and ESL specialists alike struggled with the ambiguity of the standards descriptions, which can lead to different understandings of the language demands of both ELD and academic content-area standards.
- Establishing ELP alignment is a continuous improvement process that involves the study of the language demands embedded in the content of standards and assessments. The categories to characterize the language complexity employed in the current research project may also be applied to curricular materials to ensure alignment among standards, assessments, and curricular/instructional materials.

Research like ours into ELP alignment can help the assessment Peer Review process continuously improve the evidence-based guidelines. Above all, continuous ELP alignment evaluation will help to ensure the equity of supporting EL students in standards-based education.

Read more in Alison L. Bailey, Mikyung Kim Wolf, and Laura Ballard, “English Language Proficiency Standards and Assessment Alignment: Issues, Insights, and innovations for Guiding Peer Review”, January, 2022. [LINK https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Research_Notes_Bailey_Wolf_Balla...]