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MOVING BEYOND THE ENGLISH LEARNER LABEL

Achieving linguistic equity
and academic excellence
through assessment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the United States, English learners (ELs) continue to be the fastest-growing demographic group within public schools. According to 2019 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are an estimated 4.8 million ELs, making up approximately 9.6% of all public school students. ELs represent a highly diverse and unique group of learners with many native languages and varying levels of proficiency in English, acculturation to the U.S. school system, and exposure to assessments. Most educators do not have training or experience teaching ELs, yet are tasked with ensuring that students not only become proficient in English but also gain mastery in core content areas including English language arts, math, science, and social studies.

This whitepaper outlines how general educators can approach the challenge of teaching ELs within a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to support strong academic language acquisition and content learning.

INTRODUCTION

Eighteen years have passed since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought ELs to the forefront of school accountability measures in the U.S. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB. ESSA calls for an urgent and pervasive need to define and enhance instructional practices that result in improved educational conditions and outcomes for this growing and diverse student demographic. Under ESSA, individual states and school districts have more flexibility in determining the standards that students are held to while keeping the multiple measure accountability systems of standardized measures. By requiring that one of the multiple measures include a language proficiency measure along with achievement and growth measures (ESSA, 2015), the Department of Education is holding states and districts accountable to address the underperformance of ELs.

ELs come into classrooms with varying interests, backgrounds, and levels of content knowledge and language proficiency in both their native language and English. In light of continued increase in the rigor of core content standards across states, it is critical that every teacher who interacts with ELs be highly effective in meeting these students' unique academic and linguistics needs.

Assessments play a pivotal role in MTSS and provide schools and teachers key information that inform instructional supports based on individual student needs. Using MTSS allows schools to develop and use a comprehensive, multiple-measure assessment plan for all students. However, specifically for ELs, a comprehensive assessment plan which includes universal screening, progress monitoring, English language proficiency assessments, and formative assessments helps identify the academic and linguistic needs of these students and coordinate supports.

Where in ESSA are ELs Addressed?

Title 1 Part C: Educating of Migratory Children and Title 3 Part A: English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act

Data from screening and benchmark assessments provide schools and teachers with information about the needs of their students. Specifically, whether students are at risk for not reaching benchmark or are at risk for future learning difficulties. Based on results of screening data, the progress of students who are considered at risk is then monitored frequently. Progress monitoring provides teachers with information about a student's response to instruction and whether they are making gains. When used specifically with ELs, a comprehensive assessment approach allows schools to coordinate data collection procedures school-wide, interpret data, and inform whether core instruction, English language supports, and interventions are meeting the academic and linguistic needs of ELs.

To move beyond the EL label toward linguistic and academic excellence, it is essential that schools and teachers clearly understand ESSA's requirements for ELs. A comprehensive assessment plan can be one key component to eradicate historical inequities of ELs' underperformance in academic measures, thereby closing achievement gaps. In the most recent 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Report Card, there continues to be a significant opportunity and achievement gap between ELs and non ELs. There was a 33-point differential in 4th Grade Reading Proficiency when comparing ELs to non ELs. Only 10% of 4th grade and 4% of 8th grade ELs were at or above proficiency in Reading compared to 39% and 36% native-English speakers. Using ESSA requirements to guide a comprehensive assessment plan to select, implement and monitor evidence-based strategies, is a pathway to accelerate linguistic and academic outcomes for ELs within an MTSS Framework.

A Quick Look at ELs

Arabic: 2.3%
Chinese: 2.2%
Vietnamese: 1.8%
Somali: 0.8%
Hmong/Russian: 0.7%
Spanish: 77.1%
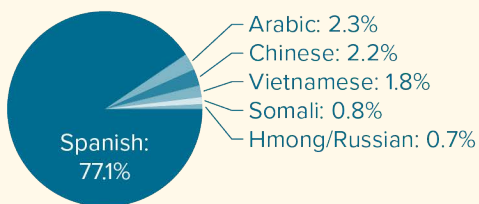
ELs represent more than
350 languages
spoken at home.
(U.S. Census, 2019)

4.8M
U.S. K-12 public school students are ELs — that's 9.6% of students (NCES).

The majority of ELs enrolled in public schools are U.S. born.

18 ★★★★★★ ★★★★★★
States report a percentage of ELs between 6-10%.

The EL label is intended to be temporary.

Once the student gains English proficiency, ELs are expected to be removed from EL services.

DEFINING ENGLISH LEARNERS (ELS)

In ESSA, The term "English learner" is defined as someone:

A. who is aged 3 through 21;

B. who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;

C.

    (i)   who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;

    (ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and

    (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or

    (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and

D. whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual

    (i)   the ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement on state assessments described in section 1111(b)(3);

    (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or

    (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

ELs first and foremost have a protected class status given by the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision Lau v. Nichols, 1974. It recognized that the lack of language instruction for students with limited English proficiency prohibited students from accessing curriculum and therefore was a violation of their civil rights. EL students have a right to equitable opportunities in schools. The ESSA amendments to ESEA retained the definition of Limited English Proficient (LEP) but adopted English learner. Under ESEA, the definition of EL is a complex combination of objective and subjective criteria that states and local education agencies must apply to identify students who need English language instructional programs and are eligible to receive federally funded supplemental services.

CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING ELS UNDER ESSA

The complexity of the definition of ELs, coupled with the discretion given to states, led to substantial variability in school districts' ability to identify students as ELs. The ESSA amendments to ESEA attempted to reduce this variability by requiring states to establish standardized entrance and exit procedures for ELs, thereby diminishing school district discretion. However, there remains an inherent variability in national EL data reports because each state maintains discretion in the initial identification of ELs and their subsequent exiting from EL programs.

Regardless of entrance and exit criteria, the statute is clear: ELs must be provided a language assistance program that is effective, educationally sound and proven successful. What remains more nebulous is the design and delivery of language instruction educational programs that should be implemented. Due to the diversity of ELs, there is no one curriculum, program, strategy, and/or magic bullet to adequately meet the needs of all ELs. **Therefore, the use of effective assessment measures is essential to helping teachers be adaptive and responsive to individual student needs.**

MOVE ELS TOWARD LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS WITH ASSESSMENT

One key to providing appropriate and personalized supports to ELs is understanding where students are at in their learning and monitoring their growth in English proficiency, academic content areas and social-emotional skills. MTSS or Response to Intervention (RTI) frameworks have emerged as umbrella structures to provide focused support to all students and improve educational outcomes (Gibbons et al., 2019). These frameworks are grounded in high-quality and effective core

instruction that is data-driven and highly supportive of student learning. They leverage the power of the universal instructional tier as the largest opportunity to have an impact on student learning. Coupled with data-driven decision-making processes, tiered interventions and job-embedded professional learning for teachers (Gibbons, Brow, & Niebling), MTSS and RTI results in instruction that is taught in a manner that prevents learning gaps from becoming life-long learning deficits.

Tier

3 — Intensive, Individualized Interventions

2 — Targeted, Small Group Instruction

1 — Universal Instruction
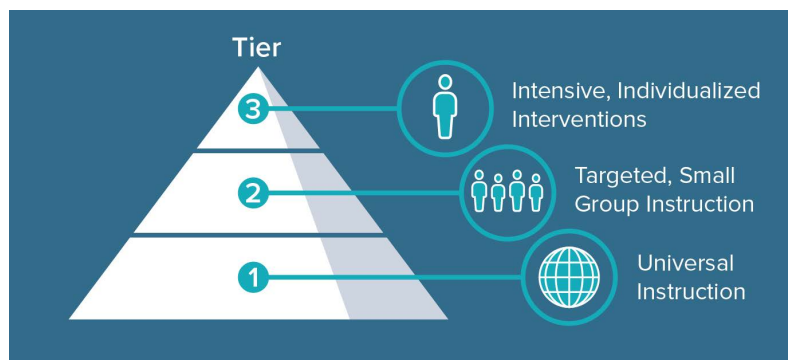
To bridge the divide between language proficiency and student achievement for ELs, assessment must be used in a varied and multi-functional approach, conceptualizing assessment as, for and of learning (Gottlieb, 2016).

- Assessment **as** learning provides individual student performance data to guide personalized instruction.
- Assessment **for** learning recognizes the important role of the teacher in making data-informed instructional decisions which result in improved learning outcomes for students.
- Assessment **of** learning provides key stakeholders such as administrators, districts and states a measure on student performance.

Moreover, effective assessment practices are essential to successfully engage and increase student agency. ESSA calls for multiple measures to make data-based decisions for the instruction of ELs. Assessment is a core component of MTSS and key to fulfilling ESSA requirements. Within an MTSS framework, the following assessments should be included:

1. Universal screening to identify where students are at in their content learning.
2. Diagnostics measures that pinpoint the specific areas in which students are struggling.
3. Regular progress monitoring to ensure that supports and interventions are moving students toward grade-level goals.
4. Academic language proficiency assessments to monitor language development across the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Achieving linguistic equity and academic excellence begins with access to effective core instruction, which is an inherent right of this protected class of learners. If core instruction is the foundation

Assessing ELs vs Native-English Speakers

EL students participate in testing for a variety of purposes — several of which do not apply to their English-speaking peers. And for those assessment purposes that do span both groups, specific assessment practices must be followed to ensure ELs' success. Learn more about key differences in EL assessment.

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of the MTSS framework, then assessment is the cornerstone in building a tiered and supportive approach to instruction. Teachers who understand and integrate a balance between assessment **as, for** and **of** learning are able to structure their instructional groups and interventions and customize instructional pacing of lessons based on individual student needs. According to Conner et al. (2007), this is an effective way of closing the achievement gap. Moreover, instruction is focused and poised to see all and serve all learners when assessment practices are process-oriented, inform and support instruction, monitor student progress, increase teacher pedagogy, provide ongoing descriptive feedback to the learner, and result in improved learning (Abedi & Linquanti, 2012).

Schools need to develop and implement a comprehensive assessment plan constructed to increase the number of ELs reaching or exceeding reading and language proficiency. A comprehensive assessment plan for teachers of ELs begins with access to valid and reliable assessment tools. However, most valid and reliable assessment tools are constructed for native English speakers.

USING ENGLISH ASSESSMENT MEASURES WITH ELS

A quality measure for assessing native English speakers is one that is designed to sample each of the key processing systems that the brain uses when a person reads text which results in a valid measure of assessment of reading skills (Montgomery et. al., 2013). Humans are not born readers. Rather, through an explicit and systematic approach to reading instruction, brain pathways are created. Reading is an active and dynamic process that is an acquired skill we are creating as we teach reading.

For example, word recognition happens in a four-part process in the brain which includes the following: orthographic, phonological, meaning, and context processor (Moats et. al., 2012). Learning the phonics system of an alphabetic code in any language requires that students build connections between the orthographic processor and the phonological processor of the brain. Because reading takes place at the neurological level, the process is the same for all learners. Word recognition is the foundation of language comprehension. The phonological and orthographic processors need to be activated before a student can activate meaning. Thus, children can't access meaning until students can read the word.

Teachers of ELs benefit from using assessment data measuring a student's acquisition of foundational reading skills in the target language of English. A study by Grimm et al. (2017) investigated the Spanish and English kindergarten predictors of later English literacy development through 8th grade. A notable characteristic of this study is its use of standardized assessment data to compare longitudinal reading achievement of Spanish-speaking EL students to non-EL students. This study concluded that early measures of literacy were strong predictors of later reading comprehension over time.

Another study conducted by Solari et al. (2014), investigated the relationship between Spanish and English early literacy skills of ELs in kindergarten and 1st grade, and oral language proficiency at the end of 2nd grade. In both studies, researchers examined foundational literacy skills in Spanish (L1), and English (L2). According to Solari et al. (2014), the research indicated that phonological awareness of onset and rhyme in Spanish and English in kindergarten were strong predictors of oral reading fluency at the end of 1st grade. Once phonological awareness moved to segmenting and blending, and onset and rhyme were secure in English measures, measuring students' acquisition of foundational reading skills were predictive via English measures. Thus, the usage of early reading assessments is an effective and important practice for measuring achievement growth and linguistic growth over time.

Assessing Across Multiple Languages

While ELs must be assessed with measures written for English speakers, it is also sound practice to periodically conduct oral and written language proficiency assessments in students' native languages. Find out what that data can tell you.

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However, it may be beneficial to screen and assess kindergarten EL students in Spanish and English to more accurately track early phonological awareness. Moreover, the usage of oral reading fluency is an evidenced-based monitoring practice for both monolingual English-speaking students and ELs with a Spanish-speaking background as a predictor of later literacy development. Research suggests that early identification and intensive intervention using such measures has the greatest potential to close achievement gaps.

Foundational reading skills are the same for all students who need to learn basic literacy skills, including students who begin learning literacy skills after kindergarten. However, the way the skills are taught and how quickly the students can be expected to acquire the basic skills and move on to higher-level reading and writing depend on their age, cognitive level, and previous oral and written literacy experiences in their native language and in English. EL students, like other students who need support in foundational reading skills, benefit from early intervention. Therefore, the developmental literacy progression is likely to be similar for ELs and non ELs. However, because language is also being learned for ELs, vocabulary and language structures must also be explicitly targeted in core instruction.

FastBridge Assessments for ELs

Both earlyReading (K-10) and CBMreading (1-8) are effective assessments for determining student progress in acquiring foundational reading skills in English. earlyReading Spanish and CBMreading Spanish also are available to compare language skills for students whose first language is Spanish. All four of these assessment measures can be used for universal screening and progress monitoring to track students' language development. A Spanish version of aReading is currently in development and will provide an additional screening tool for those who work with native Spanish-speaking students.

BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE EL ASSESSMENT PLAN

A comprehensive assessment plan for ELs should include **interim benchmark assessments** such as **universal screening, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring,** and **English language proficiency assessments.**

Universal Screening

The purpose of universal screening is to help schools and/or teachers quickly identify students who display lagging skills and are at risk of missing year-end grade-level benchmarks. With universal screening, the same assessment is given at scheduled points throughout the school year to the same students and in the same manner. These are then used to predict outcomes and guide interventions.

Diagnostic Assessments

If a student scores below benchmark after taking the screener, a diagnostic assessment determines which targeted skill(s) needs to be addressed. By utilizing a diagnostic assessment, schools and teachers are able to pinpoint and determine which intervention is most appropriate for each student. In an MTSS framework, schools and teachers use a problem-solving process to determine the category of the problem and whether there is a skill deficit that needs to be addressed instructionally using the three tiers of support.

FastBridge Screening Assessments

Reading: aReading (K-12), earlyReading (K-1), CBMreading (1-8), AUTOreading, COMPefficiency

Math: aMath (K-8), earlyMath (K-1), CBM-math-Automaticity (1-3), CBMmath-process (2-6), CBMmath-concepts and applications (K-8)

Behavior: SAEBRS (Teacher Form; K-12), MySAEBRS (Student Form; 2-12), Developmental Milestones (PK-K)

LEARN MORE ABOUT FASTBRIDGE MEASURES FOR UNIVERSAL SCREENING.

Progress Monitoring

Teachers of ELs need to have baseline data of academic achievement and language proficiency to track student progress over time. A comprehensive progress monitoring approach can inform schools and teachers if an intervention is working. Also, it informs the teacher of what instructional adjustments must be made. Progress monitoring is considered a standardized formative assessment that should occur frequently—preferably weekly. Frequent progress monitoring is essential once a student has been identified as at risk and placed in an intervention group because it allows the teacher and/or school to track if a designated intervention is impacting learning.

Progress monitoring assessments use Curriculum-Based Measures (CBM) to determine whether core instruction and/or intervention is closing the gap and resulting in growth for the student. Progress monitoring assessment data interpretation is based on rate of improvement and meeting the established intervention goal. There are two types of standardized progress monitoring:

- Skills measures measure how students are progressing at their instructional level. They help determine when to move students from one skill or intervention to the next.
- General outcome measures reflect how students are progressing at their grade level and highlight if they are able to use those skills more generally as they work in grade level material.

One way to ensure linguistic equity for ELs is to collect objective data of student progress and bring multiple perspectives to the table when analyzing data. Teachers of students who are not demonstrating progress can use progress monitoring data as one of the multiple measures and/or criterion to determine if a more in-depth evaluation is needed. Further intensive evaluation can determine if a learning disability exists.

FastBridge Progress Monitoring Assessments

Reading: AUTOreading, CBMreading and earlyReading subtests

Math: CBMmath-automaticity, CBMmath-CAP, CBMmath-process, earlyMath subtests

Behavior: Direct Behavior Rating

LEARN MORE ABOUT FASTBRIDGE MEASURES FOR PROGRESS MONITORING.

English Language Proficiency Assessments

State English language proficiency assessments are designed to measure ELs' proficiency in the English language. ESSA calls for English language proficiency assessments that measure students' proficiency levels and progress in the four domains of language: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These are not to be confused with reading/language arts assessments, which measure what students know and are able to do in the specific academic content area of reading/language arts. English language proficiency is based on a language development continuum of how well a student understands and communicates in English. In the United States, there is some variability of what assessments are used and what is measured based on the school district, state and region.

The WIDA Consortium, a U.S.-based collaborative group of 40 member states, uses the ACCESS for ELLs assessment to measure English language proficiency. The ACCESS assessment divides language proficiency into the following six levels: entering, emerging, developing, expanding, bridging, and reaching. The assessments are developed to measure the WIDA English Language Proficiency Standards.

Some of the larger EL demographic states like California, Texas, Arizona, and New York have their own independent assessments. California, for example, uses the English Language Proficiency Assessment for California (ELPAC), which is used to measure the California English Language Proficiency Assessments.

ESSA REQUIREMENTS FOR UNIVERSAL CORE INSTRUCTION FOR ELS

Under ESSA, a state's English language proficiency standards must be aligned with challenging academic standards in content areas such as English language arts, mathematics and science. It is especially important that the English language proficiency standards reflect the language demands of each content area. This requires a deep level of understanding of content and language objectives on the part of the teacher. According to the California State Board of Education (2012), "ELs at all proficiency levels are capable of high-level thinking and can engage in complex, cognitively demanding social and academic activities requiring language as long as they are provided linguistic support."

LINGUISTIC SUPPORTS IN CORE SUBJECTS

Assessment is a key component to achieving linguistic and academic excellence for ELs in core instruction. Undoubtedly, effective core instruction with appropriate linguistic support, language development and interventions work in conjunction to close the academic and opportunity gap for ELs.

The traditional approach to language acquisition and English instruction was to focus on language as form and function. For example, in an ELA class, students learned the language of compare and contrast. However, learning the form and function of compare and contrast language was incomplete because it was void of how the language of compare and contrast was used in a specific context such as in a math or science discourse.

The adoption of more rigorous common core and state standards has shifted the language demands to what students are supposed to do with language within an academic content area. It is essential that teachers of ELs work to develop a deep awareness of language. Language is dynamic and must be contextualized in a social context (van Lier & Walqui, 2012). It is the application and use of language in a core subject as students build language proficiency that determines how the teacher should be scaffolding and providing linguistic support.

Linguistic support for ELs in core instruction must include content learning outcomes based on local standards and curricular resources, assessments and tasks. Teachers have to increase their awareness of what academic language is needed to master that standard. Content learning supports for ELs includes the following: building background knowledge, connecting to a student's prior knowledge, teacher modeling, use of graphic organizers, and structured student conversations that promote oral language development while concurrently engaging students in deeper thinking about the content. Each lesson needs to be constructed to include the four domains of language proficiency: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Learning language via content includes understanding what aspects of the language students must understand to meet content outcomes. Language cannot be isolated from thought or from social interaction. Language is action (van Lier & Walqui, 2012). For ELs to become proficient in usage of academic language, students must be engaged in opportunities where those linguistic demands are being practiced in oral and written language which happens through academic discourse. ELs have to engage in conversations and rich academic tasks that help them improve their receptive and productive language.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN CORE INSTRUCTION IS THE BRIDGE TO EL EQUITY

Formative assessments are the most relevant to ELs because they live in the teaching and learning paradigm of daily core instruction. According to Hammond (2014), "Formative assessments are a critical tool of, for and as learning." When these assessments are used in tandem with academic language proficiency assessments, teachers who work with ELs are better equipped to differentiate and mitigate the impact of English acquisition on learning, thereby meeting ESSA requirements of utilizing multiple measures of assessment to meet the unique academic and linguistic needs of every EL.

Using a comprehensive and multi-measure approach allows educators to make data-based decisions about where each learner is acquiring content skills in relation to their language acquisition development. When schools, grade-level teams and teachers use comprehensive assessment data along with formative data to reflect on instructional practices, this will move core instruction to be responsive to ELs needs. By engaging students in the assessment practices choice, voice and preferred methods of self and peer assessment, we begin to build a bridge to true equitable practices that result in deeper learning. To achieve equity and academic excellence, educators must prioritize linguistically and culturally responsive instructional practices and ensure that they carry over to assessment and analysis of that data.

The category and/or demographic designation of EL is given to help us generalize and group students with similar needs. Historically, there has been a tendency to overgeneralize and/or simplify students' needs based on this label. What we must remember is that every student is unique. EL students come into classrooms with varying interests, backgrounds, levels of content knowledge, and language proficiency in both their native language(s) and English. Seeing students through a value added lens and honoring their home languages, cultural backgrounds and uniqueness is the heart and foundation of teaching and supporting ELs. Using a comprehensive assessment plan that bridges academic and linguistic need, and working within an MTSS framework to reflect on the individual needs of each learner and our instructional impact, is essential to achieving linguistic equity.

As our education system continues to move toward increasingly more rigorous content core standards in math, English language arts, science, and social studies, a more comprehensive approach to academic achievement and English language proficiency assessments is needed to ensure increased learning outcomes for all ELs.

FastBridge provides several assessments and reports that can pinpoint the strengths and needs of English learners so that teachers can provide more effective, targeted instruction to grow students' English proficiency and content area knowledge.

Reach out for more information about how FastBridge can help you strengthen instruction and improve learning for all students, including ELs.

CONTACT FASTBRIDGE

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Illuminate Education equips educators to take a data-driven approach to serving the whole child. Our solution combines comprehensive assessment, MTSS management and collaboration, and real-time dashboard tools, and puts them in the hands of educators. As a result, educators can monitor learning and growth, identify academic and social-emotional behavioral needs, and align targeted supports in order to accelerate learning for each student.