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Carolyn N. Waters

Virginia Commonwealth University, waterscn@alumni.vcu.edu

MERC English Learner Research & Evaluation Team, Virginia Commonwealth University

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Policy and Practice Brief 6: Considerations for Using ACCESS Test Scores in Decision-Making

Carolyn N. Waters, Ph.D.

MERC English Learner Research and Evaluation Team



Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), all students identified as English learners (ELs) in U.S. public schools have been required to take an annual assessment of English language proficiency (ELP) for federal accountability purposes.¹ To comply with this mandate, the WIDA Consortium (or WIDA) launched its Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs® or ACCESS) test in 2005. Virginia adopted ACCESS in 2008,² and the test is currently used by 40 state education agencies (SEAs).³ ELs in Virginia must take the assessment each year until they reach “Proficiency” with a score of 4.4,⁴ at a cost of \$27.75 per student in 2021 (\$141.25 for the Alternate ACCESS for students with significant cognitive disabilities; \$187.75 for the Braille ACCESS).⁵ WIDA suggests that in addition to the accountability purposes for which the test was designed, ACCESS scores have many potential uses in high-stakes decision making, including determining when multilingual learners have reached English proficiency, deciding about Language Instruction Educational Program (LIEP) entry and exit, informing classroom instruction and assessment, monitoring year-to-year student progress, suggesting how teachers might scaffold instruction or focus on each of the four language domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and deciding on staffing levels.⁶ ACCESS scores are also commonly used in evaluating teacher performance,⁷ although WIDA recommends against this practice.⁸ Despite the test’s long history, widespread adoption, multiple uses, and costs, few evaluations of the test are available, with the exception of reliability and validity studies conducted by researchers at WIDA-affiliated institutions.⁹

Considerations for the Validity of Decisions Based on ACCESS Test Scores

Validity, or the degree to which interpretations of test scores for the proposed uses of tests are supported by evidence and theory, is the most fundamental consideration in developing and evaluating tests.¹⁰ When evaluating the validity of ACCESS and other ELP tests, we should

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/1>

² <https://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/resolutions/2008/2008-15.shtml>

³ <https://wida.wisc.edu/memberships/consortium>

⁴ https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2017/168-17.shtml

⁵ https://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2020/index.shtml

⁶ <https://wida.wisc.edu/assess/access/scores-reports>

⁷ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

⁸ <https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/evaluating-teacher-effectiveness-using-access-ells>

⁹ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

¹⁰ American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education.

consider what an individual student's score really indicates about their development in academic English, needs for linguistic support, and readiness to succeed in English-language instruction environments. The goal is to use the test scores to make valid and appropriate decisions for students and schools. The tests should have strong *consequential validity*, or have positive social, ethical, and practical consequences.¹¹

Research suggests that the perspectives of teachers are important in the evaluation of high-stakes ELP tests, both for understanding how the tests should be interpreted and used and for identifying unintentional consequences of the tests on teaching and learning, and recommends that evaluations of these tests include anonymous surveys of the teachers who administer them.¹² One such survey of 273 Virginia K-12 EL educators conducted shortly after the close of the 2019 state ACCESS testing window found several potential threats to the validity of the ACCESS test, including threats to the test's *reliability*, or the consistency of scores across different administrations and different settings, which is a key component of validity.¹³ Concerns about the reliability of the ACCESS test include:

- discrepancies in scores between students taking the paper and electronic versions of the test,
- inadequate, noisy testing environments in some schools, and
- differing test-preparation practices across schools, ranging from no preparation, to preparation activities targeted to specific groups, to extensive preparation for test content and format using teacher-designed and/or WIDA-developed materials.

The study also raised questions about the ACCESS test's *construct validity*, or the degree to which the test measures the concept or characteristic that it is intended to or claims to measure.¹⁴ Academic English, which is the test construct of ACCESS and other high-stakes ELP tests, is controversial and has not been well defined by test developers.¹⁵ The Virginia educators surveyed in the study identified several potential threats to the construct validity of the test, suggesting that in addition to measuring proficiency in academic English, ACCESS may also be measuring extraneous factors, including:

- content knowledge, since alignment between ACCESS and Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOLs) has not been evaluated,¹⁶ although the test has been shown to be aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS),¹⁷
- cultural background knowledge,
- stamina necessary for completing all four reading, writing, listening, and speaking subtests, each covering five academic domains,
- attention span for remembering long spoken passages before responding to speaking test items,

¹¹ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.35.11.1012>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.5054/tq.2011.268063>

¹³ American Educational Research Association, et al. (2014).

¹⁴ Ibid; Brown, J. D. (1996). *Testing in language programs*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

¹⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627190802394404>; <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X14556072>

¹⁶ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

¹⁷ https://achievementstrategies.org/docsTemplates/CommonCore/WIDA_Common_Core_Alignment03_14_11.pdf

- literacy required to read the answer choices on the listening subtest,
- computer literacy and keyboarding skills for the electronic version of the test,
- effort, a lack of which may cause older and more proficient students to score lower than their true proficiency,
- guessing, because unknown multiple choice items cannot be skipped, and “lucky guesses” may inflate the scores of lower-proficiency students,
- disability, since some Individualized Education Program (IEP) student accommodations are not permitted during ACCESS administration, and
- affect, such as shyness and/or stress.

Furthermore, many of the educators pointed out that the extended time period that elapses between ACCESS test administration (typically in January to March) and the receipt of scores (usually in June) sometimes results in inappropriate decisions for the following school year, since students’ proficiency may change in the intervening months.¹⁸

Recommendations for Schools and School Divisions

Because of the concerns for the validity of the ACCESS test mentioned above, it is suggested that schools and school divisions take the following steps when making high-stakes decisions for ELs:

- **Consider multiple data points, not just ACCESS test results.** Data that is available for all students, including Phonological Awareness Literacy screening (PALS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test data, benchmark tests, classroom assessments, SOL scores, report cards, portfolios, and observation of classroom engagement and performance, can be used in conjunction with ACCESS scores to inform decisions about placements and support. ELP assessment experts recommend using multiple criteria for assessing the level of English proficiency of ELs, particularly for high-stakes decision-making.¹⁹ Virginia has established a single overall composite score of 4.4 as the sole criterion for exiting students from EL classification,²⁰ but some states, including California and New York, consider multiple measures as well as input from teachers, parents, and students when making reclassification decisions,²¹ recognizing that a single test of proficiency in English is only one of many predictors of success in school.
- **Ensure adequate ACCESS testing conditions and resources.** Because high-stakes decisions are made based on the test scores, and because schools are held accountable for English learner progress, it is important to provide appropriate, quiet space and adequate technology for ACCESS test-takers, as well as support for test administrators, as would be afforded for SOL testing.

¹⁸ <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6188/>

¹⁹ American Educational Research Association, et al. (2014); https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ELP_Report.pdf; <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170408501015>; <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X14556072>; <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308317845>

²⁰ http://www.doe.virginia.gov/administrators/superintendents_memos/2017/168-17.shtml

²¹ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/rd/reclass1718.asp>; <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/bilingual/ellidchartguidance7.1.15.pdf>

- **Provide the paper version of the test** for students who do not yet have strong computer literacy or keyboarding skills.
- **Use the online test practice materials provided by WIDA** when administering the ACCESS 2.0 electronic test in order to familiarize students with the test format.
- **Refrain from using ACCESS scores for teacher evaluation.** WIDA recommends against this practice, stating that basing teacher evaluation on ACCESS scores is problematic due to attribution bias (since progress in language development is dependent on many factors and cannot be attributed to the contributions of a single teacher) and statistical imprecision (because a teacher's caseload constitutes a small sample size).²²

²² <https://wida.wisc.edu/resources/evaluating-teacher-effectiveness-using-access-ells>