



2011

# Accommodations for English Language Learners with Disabilities on Federally Mandated English Language Proficiency Assessments

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ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES  
IN FEDERALLY-MANDATED STATEWIDE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENTS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am exceptionally thankful to my advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. Yaoying Xu, whose encouragement, supervision and support enabled me to develop a deep understanding of my topic through guidance while conducting my research and completing analysis of the results. My gratitude for her began when she inspired my interest in my topic and she has helped me cultivate passion for my interest throughout the dissertation process. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Paul Wehman, Dr. Evelyn Reed, and Dr. Peter Nguyen who have provided continued support and guidance. Additionally, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to The Virginia Department of Education and the teachers and administrators who provided the data for my research.

In addition to my advisor and the members of my committee, I am sincerely grateful for my husband, Jason Kuti who offered continued support throughout my program of study. My son, Evan Kuti, who was born two weeks after my Prospectus Hearing was a continued source of motivation to fulfill this accomplishment.

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## **Abstract**

### **ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN FEDERALLY-MANDATED STATEWIDE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENTS**

By Laura M. Kuti, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

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Associate Professor, Department of Special Education and Disability Policy  
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The purpose of this research study was to conduct exploratory research to examine federally-mandated annual English language proficiency (ELP) assessment of English language learners (ELLs) and their use of accommodations on the assessment. First the researcher provides a review of the literature regarding accommodations provided for ELLs, students with disabilities on English assessments, and ELLs with disabilities on ELP assessments. The researcher examined the literature for differences and similarities between the three types of testing scenarios as well as identifying gaps in the literature for students who are both ELLs and who also have a disability and how their ELP is assessed, taking into account their disability. Based on the research presented in the review of the literature, the researcher provides the results from investigating data related to ELLs with disabilities and specific accommodations used by

ELLs with disabilities to contribute to the limited current research available regarding this subgroup and to explore how the annual ELP assessment mandate is actuated at the state, district and classroom levels.

The researcher used one state's existing quantitative ELP assessment data to examine types of accommodations used for ELLs with disabilities on the statewide ELP assessment and then explored potential relationships between specific disabilities and accommodations used. The researcher investigated factors that contribute to the relationships between disabilities, accommodations, and performance on the ELP assessment through qualitative data from interviews with state, district, and school level personnel to further expand on results from the quantitative ELP assessment data.

Key words: English language learners, disability, assessment, accommodations.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

English Language Learners (ELLs) make up 9% of the Kindergarten-Grade 12 student population in the United States (Zehr, 2009). Between the years 2000 and 2005, the ELL enrollment increased by 18% and in the 2005-2006 school year over 4.5 million ELLs were enrolled in U.S. public schools and (Zehr, 2009). There are over 100 different languages spoken natively by ELLs in U.S. public schools and along with different languages comes new cultural backgrounds and diversity (Kindler, 2002; Zehr). Many families of ELLs are socioeconomically disadvantaged by parental education, employment, and poverty status and these disadvantages may put many ELLs at risk academically.

Policies from the federal government are in place to target English Language Proficiency (ELP) and promote academic achievement among all ELLs. The most significant policy in education for ELLs is Title III. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title III Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students is a federal program that assists immigrant and limited English proficient (LEP) students. ELLs is the terminology used throughout this document instead of LEP due to current naming conventions from the field to avoid use of negative language like “limited” in achieving grade-level and graduation standards, as well as acquiring the English language. The purpose of the LEP Title III Program is to assist school districts in teaching English to limited English proficient students. Additionally, the Title III funds are to be used in helping these students meet the same challenging state standards required

of all students (NCLB, 2001). Under Title III of the NCLB Act of 2001, states have two major responsibilities for the development and measurement of ELP among ELLs. Specifically, states must implement ELP standards and monitor programs to help ELLs acquire ELP at a sufficient level to be able to learn content material such as mathematics and science; or stated another way, ELP should not be a barrier to ELLs learning content area material (NCLB, 2001). Also, states are required to assess the ELP of ELLs with tests that yield valid and reliable scores (NCLB, 2001).

With regard to the state standards and assessments, Title III requires state education agencies (SEAs) to develop ELP standards aligned with content area standards. Supported by SEAs, local education agencies (LEAs) must provide equitable Title III services to students identified as limited English proficient. LEP is the term used in the legislation referring to ELLs receiving services for English language acquisition. SEAs must provide an annual assessment of ELP for all students in the state in grades K-12 in the domains of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and comprehension. State education agencies are required by Title III under NCLB to set Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) that relate to ELLs' progress in attaining ELP (AMAO 1), attainment of ELP (AMAO 2), and achievement in the content areas (AMAO 3) as a way to track student and school district-level achievement under Title III. Stated another way, Title III accountability requires ELLs to make progress in learning English, attain ELP, and learn academic content (NCLB, 2001). Yet, few states have been able to validate their current ELP assessment or accountability system because of validity issues in assessing ELLs' ELP (Wolf, Farnsworth, & Herman, 2008; Wolf, Griffin et al., 2008). Considering the significant role of assessments in guiding decisions about accountability of states, districts, and

schools as well as decisions for individual students, it is critical that more states are able to provide a validity argument for their assessment systems of ELP.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Among the 4.5 million children in the nation who are ELLs, 9% are ELLs with disabilities (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003). As mentioned, one of the requirements for Title III under NCLB is that all ELLs in grades K-12 must participate in the statewide annual assessment of ELP in the domains of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Passing or failing this assessment is directly linked to Title III funding states receive (NCLB). Considering 9% of ELLs have disabilities (all types of disabilities are included), how are SEAs handling the assessment of ELLs who have disabilities which can prohibit their participation in all or any one of the domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening?

Some states are providing accommodations when possible and some are not; some states borrow the list of allowable accommodations for their statewide assessments of content areas and apply it to the statewide ELP assessment (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). Testing accommodations are commonly defined as a change in the way that a test is administered or responded to by the person tested and are intended to offset or "correct" for distortions in scores caused by a disability (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997). Accommodations can be grouped into four categories: setting accommodations (separate room, small group administration, provisions of special furniture, etc.); scheduling accommodations (additional time, provision of frequent breaks, completion of a section per day, etc.); testing materials accommodations (large-print version, Braille version, etc.); and test procedures accommodations/modifications (directions read aloud, repetition or clarification of directions, answers marked in test booklet, etc.)

(Christiansen, Lazarus, Crone, & Thurlow, 2008). Some states give control to the LEAs and let the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) drive what accommodations should be provided for the ELP assessment (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). Accommodations research has chiefly been directed to either student with disabilities (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004; Johnstone, Altman, Thurlow, & Thompson, 2006), or ELLs (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Kieffer, Lesaux, Rivera, & Francis, 2009), but rarely for students who are included in both subgroups. ELLs with disabilities are assessed by both statewide ELP assessments and statewide content area assessments. Although groundwork has been laid for each population separately in assessment, research specifically on accommodations for ELLs with disabilities is needed for fair and appropriate assessment.

Some ELLs have disabilities that require special consideration when taking the federally-mandated statewide ELP assessment. The IEP team makes the decisions about how these students participate in the ELP assessment and documents their decisions in the IEP. There are particular regulations to which IEP teams must adhere, based on state specific policies and guidelines. Ideally, accommodations are intended to “level the playing field” for particular domains for some ELLs with disabilities. For some ELLs, accommodations cannot function as they are supposed to because the domain to be measured (reading, writing, speaking, or listening) does not exist or is fundamentally different for them. For example, ELLs who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to listen as required in the listening component of the ELP assessment. American Sign Language cannot be substituted for oral English because it is an entirely different language and the law requires that states measure listening in English. Likewise, students who are physically unable to produce speech never can demonstrate speaking

skills. Other forms of expressive communication, such as writing, cannot be substituted for speaking. For some ELLs with special needs, accommodations are ineffectual.

Overall, this poses a critical issue for ELLs with disabilities and the programs that serve them. Exit from language support services, which must include ELP assessment scores, is impossible because these students are not able to demonstrate ELP as it is defined in the law. As explained previously, scores in each of the domains on the ELP assessment are required. Until the law is updated with these issues in mind, states must continue to find ways to assess this specific group of students or, unfortunately, these students receive scores of zero on particular domains of the ELP assessment.

### **Rationale for the Study**

It is a legal requirement that students must receive accommodations on assessments specified in the IEP. This requirement is in place so that students with disabilities can access test content. Just as students with disabilities are provided with accommodations in order to access assessments, some ELLs use accommodations to access assessments. Examples of accommodations for ELLs include extra time, a bilingual dictionary, and a test with simplified English. It is important for ELLs to be provided with necessary accommodations on assessments so that language is not a barrier to assessing test content. For ELLs with disabilities whose IEP requires them to receive specific accommodations, it is legally binding that the accommodations be provided on all specified assessments, including ELP assessments.

For those students who are provided with accommodations in order to access the assessment, the body of research on appropriate accommodations for ELLs with specific disabilities is limited (Albus & Thurlow, 2005). Based on a critical review of the literature, this



topic is limited to ELL populations with specific disabilities from a particular native language group, who have a specific disability, or who use of a specific accommodation (see Review of Literature). Currently, no research has been published that reflects student-level data across school districts or statewide data for ELLs' use of specific accommodations according to disability or level of achievement on the assessment.

This study contributes to current research by identifying which accommodations are being used by ELLs with which particular disabilities, relationships between specific disabilities and accommodations, ELP assessment performance for ELLs with disabilities using accommodations and contributing factors for relationships between disabilities, accommodations and performance on the assessment. Qualitative data collected for this study not only provide deeper insight into potential relationships found in the quantitative element of the study, it provides credibility to the data as well (Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). The design of the study reflects the cyclical nature in which current policy affects state-level administration, school-level administration, and classroom instruction and assessment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Considering a gap in current research, analysis of statewide data on the participation of ELLs with disabilities in the federally-mandated ELP assessment provides a realistic depiction of this population's participation in the assessment. The purpose of this study was to examine the types of accommodations provided for ELLs with disabilities on statewide ELP assessments, categories of disabilities among ELLs, potential relationships between types of accommodations and disabilities, and whether and how the use of accommodations contributes to the ELLs achievement on the ELP assessment.

## **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this study, variables identified include: disability status code, types of accommodations, grade, and overall scale score on the assessment. Specifically, the author has developed the following research questions:

1. What accommodations are used for ELLs with disabilities in statewide ELP assessments?
2. Is there a relationship between the disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
3. Is there a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievements on ELP tests? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
4. What are perceptions that exist on accommodations on annual ELP assessments for the specific population of ELLs with disabilities among state, district, and classroom level educational professionals?

## **Key Terms and Definitions**

The following section includes key terms applied to this study. The key terms include definitions of ELL, ELP, native language, disability, and accommodation. The definitions are provided for the key terms used most frequently in subsequent chapters.

*English Language Learner (ELL)*. For purposes of this research, an ELL is defined as a student whose primary language is other than English and that language is the dominant language in the home. These students are sometimes referred to as EL (English learner) which is

a newly developed term used mostly on the west coast of the United States or LEP (limited English proficient) (NCLB, 2001) which is a term used strictly for reporting purposes by the federal and state governments, soon to be phased out due to its negative connotation.

*English Language Proficiency (ELP).* Much debate still exists on defining the term ELP and its constructs. English language proficiency involves the five language components: phonological, lexical, grammatical, functional, and discourse (Scarcella, 2003). For federal accountability purposes, it also involves the construct of academic language. This refers to the academic language or language of school that students need to acquire to be successful in the general education classroom (NCLB, 2001; Scarcella, 2003).

*Native Language.* Native language is defined as the primary language the student was accustomed to since birth and the primary language spoken in the home (NCLB, 2001). This often reflects the language of the home country of the student/student's family. School districts are required to employ some method of asking the native language of any student registering in a school district. The most typical way this is handled is through administration of a Home Language Survey by the school district upon registration. If on the Home Language Survey a parent indicates that the home language is a language other than English, the student's ELP is then assessed.

*Disability.* Another term frequently used in this study is "disability." According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990), disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of major life activities, record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment. There are differences between the ADA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997, 2004). Under IDEA, a

student who receives special education services must meet two conditions: (a) the student has 1 of the 13 disabilities categories as defined by IDEA (autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness); and (b) because of the disability, the student has the educational needs for special education serves. Therefore, the eligibility requirement for school-age children includes both the disability and the needs of the student. In school districts, a disability is typically noted by the classroom teacher (or other school staff person) or by a parent. Districts employ a referral process to investigate if a student has a disability and then create an IEP to assist school professionals in best instructing and assessing the student. Once a student is referred, the multidisciplinary team has to first determine whether the student has the disability based on the IDEA definition of the 13 categories, then the team needs to decide whether the student has the need for receiving special education and related services.

*Accommodation.* The term “accommodation” can refer to tools used during instruction or during assessment by students with disabilities (many times they are one in the same). For the purposes of this paper, the researcher will focus on accommodations for assessment.

Accommodations are defined by changes to the setting, scheduling, materials, or procedures in order to allow meaningful participation in assessments (NCLB, 2001). Disability can pose a serious challenge to learning and to demonstrating knowledge and abilities fully.

Accommodations can help students overcome or minimize the barriers presented by their

disabilities—which is why federal law requires their use when necessary (Elliott, Kratochwill, & Schulte, 1999; McDonnell et al., 1997; Pitoniak & Royer, 2001).

There are several other terms that will be of importance throughout this paper, however, they will be addressed specifically as per the topic of their relation.

### **Methodology**

The research design for this study is nonexperimental. The research study is exploratory in nature using extant quantitative data and qualitative data collected by the researcher. To address the research questions, data from the federally-mandated statewide ELP assessment in Virginia, the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English Test (ACCESS) for ELLs, created by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium and produced by Metritech (2007), was used. Qualitative data through interviews with state-, district- and school-level personnel were also collected. The researcher completed an analysis of the data specific to ELLs with disabilities and their use specific accommodations using SPSS and by performing content analysis of qualitative data. Relationships between identified variables and implications were investigated and are described in detail in Chapter 4.

The first question was addressed through descriptive statistics by examining types of accommodations and categories of disabilities. The author was able to identify which accommodations are most often used by ELLs with particular disabilities. The second question was examined through chi square statistical analysis. The author also explored relationships between specific disabilities and accommodations provided for the assessment. The researcher further investigated contributing factors to the relationship through analysis of the qualitative data collected from interviews. This analysis provided potential factors that contribute to

relationships between ELLs with specific disabilities and accommodations. The third question was addressed by conducting a univariate analysis of variance to examine the relationship between accommodations and ELLs' achievements on ELP assessment. The researcher analyzed qualitative interview data to further explore the contributing factors to a relationship between achievement on the assessment and use of accommodations. The fourth question was addressed through data analysis of the qualitative interviews.

The researcher sought to provide results that are valid and reliable. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative data the researcher used triangulation of the data and the methods along with participant feedback agreement to address research validity (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In terms of reliability, particularly for the qualitative data, the researcher involved a second researcher. A researcher with qualitative research experience and content knowledge reviewed 25% of the interviewer transcripts to ensure reliability of the transcriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). An additional researcher with qualitative research experience and content knowledge reviewed 25% of the coded transcripts to ensure reliability of the coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Limitations**

Although this research contributes to the current literature by examining potential relationships between disabilities and accommodations for ELLs, and between accommodations and ELLs' achievements on ELP tests, several limitations exist. First, using only one state's ELP assessment data limits the generalization of the findings to other states. Consequently, the data are limited to that state's specific ELL population, ELP assessment, and, purportedly, addresses the ELP standards specific to that state. The state's assessment data that was used for

this research is Virginia. Incidentally, Virginia is a member of a consortium to which 26 other states belong. Members of this consortium share the same statewide ELP assessment and ELP standards. While use of just one state's data remains a limitation, because 26 other states use the same standards and assessment for the ELL population, future research lends itself to comparable data through the same assessment and standards for the other consortium member states.

The population of ELLs in this research is specific to Virginia. In 2008-2009, approximately 86,751 ELLs were enrolled in Virginia schools in grades K-12 (P. Raskopf, personal communication, April 13, 2010). The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) reported that the majority of ELLs in Virginia are from Spanish-speaking countries, but the population is varied and includes speakers of over 100 different native languages (VDOE, 2009). The other population to take into consideration is the population of students with disabilities. In 2008-2009, students with disabilities were 13.3% of the student population in Virginia (P. Raskopf, personal communication, April 13, 2010). Because the research focuses on ELLs with disabilities, it is critical to consider that both of these populations (ELLs and students with disabilities) adhere to state-specific identification and eligibility processes; and for students who are included in both subgroups, there are particular guidelines to specify how ELLs with disabilities will participate in the statewide ELP assessment and specific procedures to identify accommodations to be provided to these students. It is critical to consider that the identification and eligibility processes are susceptible sources of error (Abedi, 2006). In 2009, 5.9% of all students with disabilities were ELLs with disabilities in Virginia (P. Raskopf, personal communication, April 13, 2010). The research presented in this study will be exclusively limited to this particular population of students in Virginia.

Another limitation to the research is that the data are limited to the accommodations that are provided to the students. Although the accommodations are provided, there is no way of accounting for use of the accommodations by the students. It is quite possible that an accommodation is counted as provided, but is not actually used or is used infrequently by the student. Future research in this area should include tracking actual use of the accommodations provided to students, which can be done particularly by use of online assessment.

A final limitation is due to the research design. The design for the quantitative element of this study is based on secondary datasets. The researcher did not collect primary data and cannot account for potential flaws in test alignment to standards, test design, test administrator training, test administration, flaws in scoring, or errors in reporting.



## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Currently, the majority of research on assessment for ELLs focuses on content area assessment or ELP assessment (Abedi, 2008; Abedi & Hejri, 2004; Abedi et al., 2004; Albus & Thurlow, 2008; Bolt & Thurlow, 2004; Kieffer et al., 2009; Wolf, Farnsworth et al., 2008). Some of that research specifically examines accommodations for ELLs on content area assessments (Abedi, Hofstetter, Baker, & Lord, 2001; Albus, Thurlow, Liu, & Bielinski, 2005; Kopriva, Emick, Hipolito-Delgado, & Cameron, 2007; Rivera & Stansfield, 2003). As mentioned (see Introduction) there is gap in the current literature that distinctively examines ELLs with disabilities (Albus & Thurlow, 2008).

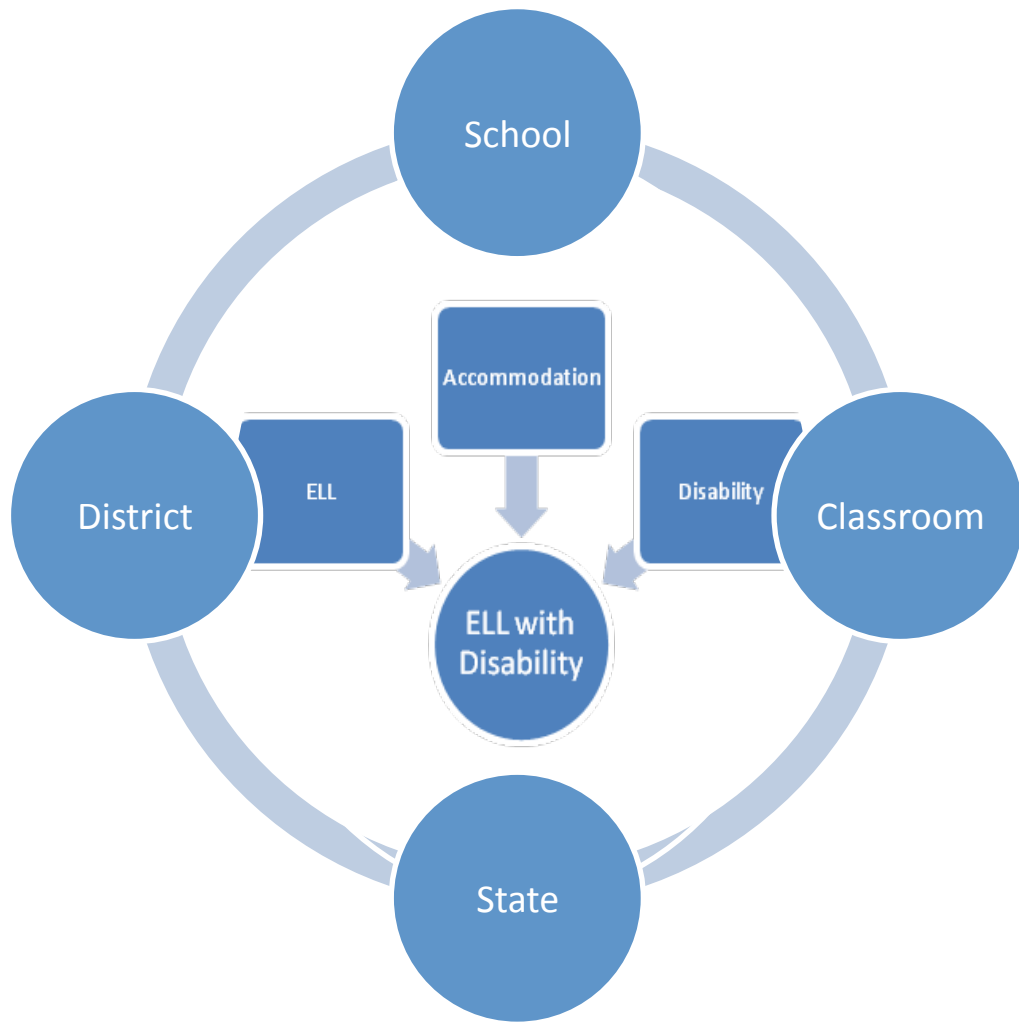
The ELL population has been increasing (Zehr, 2009). Federal requirements under NCLB state that all ELLs must participate in annual ELP assessment and content area assessments. Although the population is growing and the federal requirements are more detailed, there is very limited literature on accommodations being used for ELLs, especially for ELLs with disabilities. Additionally, when accommodations were indeed used, no further information is provided on the categories of disabilities of the students using the accommodations. The purpose of this study is to investigate how ELLs with specific disabilities are participating and/or gain access to a federally-mandated statewide ELP assessment and the relationships that exist between specific disabilities and use of particular accommodations. This study will further examine the relationship between accommodations provided and ELLs' achievements in ELP

tests. A review of the available literature provides a foundation on ELLs with disabilities and accommodations in general.

### **Conceptual Framework**

There are many layers and factors that come into consideration for the specific subgroup of ELLs with disabilities and ELP assessment. The conceptual framework that depicts the context, content, and focus of the study is depicted in Figure 1. The outer circles represent the context: administrators at state and district levels, implementers at school and classroom levels. The circle in the inner cluster represents the content: participation of ELLs with disabilities on statewide ELP assessments. The focus is represented by the three squares in the inner cluster: accommodation types and disability categories. The design of the study reflects the cyclical nature of education policy. The underlying theoretical framework is education as a system and the ways in which policy impacts the state, district, and classroom and each of these layers also affect policy in return.

As explained in Chapter 1, the purpose of the study is to add to the body of research with a reality-based depiction of the federal mandate of annual ELP assessment of ELLs with disabilities and their use of accommodations on the assessment through both quantitative and qualitative research. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 shows the context within which the research was completed. Based on Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) sociocultural learning theory, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework to incorporate the content, context, and focus of the study. Vygotsky's theory supports the framework because, according to his sociocultural learning theory, the learning context and the content are both important. In keeping with the theory, the framework also addresses the content of the research and the specific focus. With



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework.

regard to the context, this research addresses the context of administrators at the state and district levels as well as implementers at the classroom level. By including these three levels of educational professionals, the researcher intends to provide different perspectives from each of the three types of professionals involved in the assessment of this population. In terms of content, the researcher addressed accommodations in an overarching sense and then specific the sub-group of accommodations for ELLs and accommodations for students with disabilities. The researcher then blended the two subgroups in order to concentrate on ELLs with disabilities. The specific focus of the study is on specific accommodation types used by ELLs in specific disability categories on the ELP assessment. The conceptual framework demonstrates the structure upon which the study is based and the interplay between multiple structures included in the study.

The researcher provided descriptive statistics about this specific population and their use of accommodations on the annual ELP assessment. Further, the researcher used both quantitative and qualitative research to identify and provide context for relationships between specific disabilities and specific accommodations as well as specific accommodations and ELLs' achievement on the annual ELP assessment as well as the perceptions that exist among education professionals about this specific population and use of accommodations on ELP assessment.

### **Overview of Related Areas**

Research topics regarding testing of ELLs and students with disabilities (separately or combined) and accommodations can be considered from multiple angles from the research that is currently available. The approaches to the literature reviewed for this research are comprised of one section dedicated to accommodations in general, two angles involving the two subgroups

separately, and then a third angle looking at the subgroup of students who are both ELLs and who have disabilities. First, research on accommodations and universal design is addressed. This part of the literature review is included for background information on accommodations in general. The search criteria presented after this section do not apply to the overall literature on accommodations. Next, research involving the assessment of ELLs on ELP assessments and accommodations is discussed. Following that perspective, the research regarding students with disabilities and their participation on content area achievement tests (specifically English/Language Arts because it is the most closely tied content area assessment to ELP) and related accommodations are presented. Finally, the research on ELLs with disabilities and their participation on ELP assessments, including accommodations used for that subgroup are discussed.

Specifically, the objectives of this chapter are to (a) critically review the literature on accommodations for ELLs on content area assessments; (b) critically review the literature on accommodations for students with disabilities on English statewide content area assessments, as it is the most closely related content area to ELP; and (c) critically review the research available with regard to ELLs with disabilities and accommodations for their participation in required statewide annual ELP assessments. A summary of the findings follow for each category. The author highlights the identified gap in the literature, specifically addressing the lack of literature involving ELLs with disabilities and use of accommodations. Obviously, “ELLs with disabilities” is in reference to all disabilities, which includes extreme variation within a subgroup. Also, “use of accommodations” includes the many forms of accommodations that exist. The proposed study would help fill or reduce the gap in the literature by penetrating one

more level into the subgroup to describe the specific disabilities of ELLs and which accommodations they use on an ELP assessment and possible relationships between specific disabilities and specific accommodations. This study will further examine the relationship between accommodations and ELLs' achievements on ELP tests. Current research studies this population as one static subgroup. The author proposes to provide a more detailed, realistic picture of the specific disabilities within this subgroup and which specific accommodations are provided to them, allowing the population to be investigated as the dynamic and diverse group that they are.

### **Background on Accommodations**

#### **Universal Design for Learning**

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires equal access to goods and services for people with disabilities. Universal design came about through the field of architecture as a way to address these legal requirements by providing equal access to physical environments for people with special needs (Story, Mueller, & Mace, 1998). Universal design proposes that accessibility features should be considered during the conceptualization, design, and development stages of any environmental interface in order to provide an environment with the least amount of restrictions or specialized provisions for people with special needs (Pisha & Coyne, 2001). The concept of universal design was then applied to the field of education and became known as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The three principles of UDL are:

- Principle 1: To support recognition learning, provide multiple, flexible methods of presentation.

- Principle 2: To support strategic learning, provide multiple, flexible methods of expression and apprenticeship, and
- Principle 3: To support affective learning, provide multiple, flexible options for engagement.

Recently, technology has played a role in the further development of UDL in education, particularly through three different overarching uses of technology: a means of representation (e.g., video, text-to-speech); a means of engaging the learner (manipulation of or ways to interact with content or activities); and a means for the learner to express himself or herself (e.g., PowerPoint, augmentative communication, concept maps).

Disability can pose a serious challenge to learning and to demonstrating knowledge and abilities fully. Through the principles of UDL, accommodations can provide access to instruction and assessment. The term accommodation can refer to tools used during instruction or during assessment by students with disabilities (many times they are one in the same).

Accommodations can be grouped into four categories: setting accommodations (separate room, small group administration, provisions of special furniture, etc.); scheduling accommodations (additional time, provision of frequent breaks, completion of a section per day, etc.); testing materials accommodations (large-print version, Braille version, etc.); and test procedures accommodations/modifications (directions read aloud, repetition or clarification of directions, answers marked in test booklet, etc.) (Christiansen et al., 2008).

Accommodations for assessment can help students overcome or minimize the barriers presented by their disabilities—which is why federal law requires their use when necessary (Elliott et al., 1999; McDonnell et al., 1997; Pitoniak & Royer, 2001). States often assess

students with special needs through the use of accommodations and universal design. The use of testing accommodations is viewed as a central factor in increasing the participation of students with disabilities (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Silverstein, 1993).

### **Search Criteria**

In preparation for reviewing the literature on accommodations for ELLs, the author selected only peer reviewed articles. Of the peer reviewed articles, the search criteria included only empirical research articles and secondary data report meta-analyses. Years were not considered because of the limited resources available for the topic. Information that did not meet the search criteria may still be commented on within the paper, but only as supplemental information.

### **Participation of and Accommodations for ELLs on Content Area Assessments**

NCLB requires ELLs to participate in content area assessments (NCLB, 2001). The hope is that with their participation in the content area assessments, inclusion in content area instruction and, consequentially, access to academic content will be enforced. This access to academic content involves mastery of the writing system and its particular academic conventions as well as obtaining high functioning skills in reading, listening, and speaking in academic settings. Prior to NCLB this access was under-emphasized in public education of ELLs (Scarcella, 2003). With the requirements in mind, ELLs face the dual challenge of acquiring ELP and proficiency in academic content (e.g., reading, math, science). Yet assessments that federal policy states are necessary to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for ELLs are filled with technical challenges. How do we know we can trust the results of standards-based assessments administered in English? Over the past several years, states have established



different options to level the playing field for ELLs on content area assessments. Some of those options include testing in the child's native language, providing ELLs with accommodations, creating a test form that employs linguistically reduced language, and the use of an alternate or portfolio-based assessment (Butler & Stevens, 2001). Of those options, providing ELLs with accommodations is a popular alternative for states (Butler & Stevens, 2001).

Test accommodations and other previously mentioned options come from 1 of 4 categories, modifications to the setting, scheduling, materials, or procedures of the test. Examples of modifications include the following: assessment in the native language, text change in vocabulary, modification of linguistic complexity, addition of visual supports, use of glossaries in the native language, use of English glossary, linguistic modification of test directions, and additional example items/tasks, extra assessment time, breaks during testing, administration in several sessions, oral directions in the native language, small group administration, separate room administration, use of dictionaries, reading aloud of questions in English, answers written in test booklet, and directions read aloud or explained (Butler & Stevens, 2001). As can be seen with these examples, many states have simply extended the list of accommodations allowed for students with disabilities to ELLs because research on effective accommodations for this population is so limited (Shafer, Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2008). The major concern in extending the list to ELLs is that the needs of the ELLs may be different from that of students with disabilities. For example, most accommodations for students with disabilities, which intend to moderate the effects of cognitive or physical disabilities, are inappropriate for ELLs who do not have such disabilities (Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2009). Ideally, accommodations for ELLs should help students access the content of the test by

providing either direct linguistic support with the language of the test or indirect linguistic support with the conditions under which ELLs take the test. Current recommendations include assuring that students have been taught the content tested, providing accommodations that support ELLs' linguistic needs, deciding on appropriate accommodations as a team, assigning accommodations based on individual student needs (Kopriva et al., 2007). Of the limited scientifically-based research available on this topic, one overarching caution is against a one-size-fits-all approach (Abedi et al., 2004).

To investigate the available literature concerning accommodations for ELLs on content area assessment, a search in four databases was completed. Those databases include Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Psych Info. The following search terms were used: *English Language Learners, English Learners, Limited English Proficient, Content Area Assessment, Assessment, and Accommodation*. Using the search parameters above, 14 sources were found. Of those 14 sources, 6 articles fit the search criteria specified previously in this paper. One other resource did not meet the search criteria; however, it had valuable information that will be discussed at the end of this section.

Two articles examined the use of dictionaries on content area assessments. Kieffer et al. (2009) looked at accommodations for ELLs on large-scale assessments. Some of the studies included in this meta-analysis related to the content areas of math and science and, therefore, do not relate to the subject of focus on English/Language Arts or Reading content area assessments. The findings of this meta-analysis are noteworthy, however, its implications span all content areas. The analysis focused on seven different accommodations ELLs used on content area assessments (simplified English, English dictionaries or glossaries, bilingual dictionaries or

glossaries, tests in the native language, dual language test booklets, dual language questions for English passages, and extra time). Several conclusions are presented through a comparison of the academic achievement test scores in the absence of accommodations with those of native speakers, an analysis estimating the degree to which each accommodation led to improved performance of ELLs, and an analysis of validity by investigating the impact of the accommodation on non-ELLs (of which there should be no impact, if in fact the purpose of the accommodation is to level the playing field). The findings from this meta-analysis suggest that for the seven different accommodations considered none posed a threat to the validity of the assessment. However, of the seven accommodations only using an English dictionary or glossary had a statistically significant effect on ELLs' performance. It should be noted that this accommodation provided only a slight decrease in the gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. Overall, while these findings are important to consider, only 10 of the 11 studies included in the meta-analysis, involved science and mathematics assessment except one that focused on reading.

The other study included in the meta-analysis that did not focus on math or science examined the use of an English dictionary for ELLs on reading tests. The subjects of this study were 133 native Hmong speakers and 69 non-ELLs from 3 urban middle schools in a Mid-western state (Albus et al., 2005). The schools were multi-ethnic and the student population ranged between 76%-78% free and reduced lunch. Researchers used a randomized counterbalanced design. Students were asked to interpret four reading passages, two with and two without the English dictionary. All four passages were of similar word length and reading difficulty levels. There were no significant differences found between the Hmong and non-ELL students, except for a difference in the intermediate-level English proficiency students who used

the dictionary. Although this study contributed to the available literature with regard to use of a dictionary, there are some concerns regarding this study. First, the use of only Hmong students potentially decreases the ability to generalize results to native speakers of languages. It should also be noted that researchers from this study acknowledge that Hmong speakers in the school districts involved in the studies tended to enroll in school with limited proficiency in their native language, which could affect general use of a dictionary (Albus et al., 2005). Interestingly, based on self-report, not all students offered the dictionary accommodation actually used it. What this study does confirm is evidence that the dictionary accommodation may be more useful to intermediate students rather than beginning or advanced English proficiency students.

Another accommodation for ELLs has to do with the issue of linguistic complexity of test items. The language load of test items can derail students from what the item is asking and force them to focus on just trying to understand the question (Abedi & Hejri, 2004). Linguistic complexity has largely been looked at through studies involving math and science items. Five known studies have examined linguistic simplification for ELLs on math assessments (Abedi & Hejri; Abedi et al., 2001; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi, Lord, & Pummer, 1997; Kiplinger, Haug, & Abedi, 2000). They each involve the use of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math items and employs some combination of students using accommodations of simplified math items, more time, and glossaries of nontechnical math terms. The five studies each did comparisons with non-ELLs and sometimes with Formerly Limited English Proficient (FLEP) students (those students were previously labeled as LEP, but after demonstrating ELP on the annual assessment were exited from the English as a Second Language program). The studies took place in four different parts of the United States. When looking across the five

studies, there are obvious concerns about how the items were simplified, the different geographic locations/school contexts involved, and the classification of participating ELLs that varied from state to state. However, there is an overarching emerging theme that is important. All five of the studies on math items concluded that linguistic simplification may have value as an accommodation, but more research is needed (Abedi & Hejri, 2004; Abedi et al., 2001; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi et al., 1997; Kiplinger et al., 2000).

Rivera and Stansfield (2003) investigated the effect of linguistic simplification on science test items and score comparability. Their study involved a large participant group including all 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders in Delaware, specifically monolingual English speakers, LEP students who had been in Delaware schools more than 1 year, and FLEP students. Items were simplified by a specialized team of science content area specialists, linguists, English as a Second Language test developers and later reviewed by staff from the Delaware Department of Education. There were 6 forms of the science test, including 4 regular forms and 2 simplified forms. Student-level data were used to calculate findings. The findings suggested two important points. First, linguistic simplification did not provide an unfair advantage to those who received it. Second, the linguistic simplification accommodation reduced the role of language on science test items and allowed for ELLs to be assessed more so on their knowledge of the constructs of science, rather than English. Researchers for this study, similar to those from the math studies, encourage future research to address the issue of usefulness of linguistic simplification (Rivera & Stansfield, 2003).

The final study reviewed examined decision-making criteria for accommodations for ELLs on large scale content area assessments (Kopriva et al., 2007). This study involved the use

of a computerized accommodation taxonomy for ELLs, known as the Selection Taxonomy for English Language Learners Accommodations (STELLA) and focused on accommodation decision criteria for 272 ELLs in South Carolina. Participants were 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Hispanic students. Teachers completed a questionnaire about each of the participating students based on students' records (ELP, proficiency in native language, time in a U.S. school, previous formal education, experience taking tests, needs in current classroom). The information provided by the questionnaire was then entered into a database that researchers later used to determine the most appropriate accommodation for each particular student from the following list: no accommodations, a picture dictionary, a bilingual glossary, oral reading of test items in English, both oral reading and a picture dictionary, both oral reading and a bilingual glossary, both picture dictionary and bilingual glossary or oral reading, bilingual glossary, and picture dictionary. Students took a computerized test of 30 mathematics items, which tracked the number of times the accommodation was used (all accommodations were provided via computer). Students were randomly assigned to three groups in which some students received inappropriate accommodations according to STELLA, some students received appropriate accommodations according to STELLA, and some students received no accommodations. Findings suggested that those who received appropriate accommodations as defined by STELLA outperformed ELLs who either received inappropriate accommodations or no accommodations (Kopriva et al., 2007).

The findings of this study are a major addition to the limited literature on accommodations for ELLs. Although these findings are certainly a contribution to the field, there are several limitations. First, the subjects were all Hispanic, making the results less than generalizable among all ELLs. Beyond this concern, the overarching concern is critical

information that is missing from the study. Within the article it explains what questions teachers answered on a questionnaire based on students records, which as an aside, involved a heavy reliance on behalf of the teachers involved to get the needed data to respond correctly on the questionnaire for each student. The answers to the questionnaires were then entered into STELLA for each student to get an indication of appropriate accommodations for each ELL. The missing information in this study that would be of great interest for future researchers is how STELLA decided which of the possible accommodations were appropriate for which students. The author explains that decision criteria were based on formative studies with teacher focus groups, parent and teacher interviews, and expert panels, but there is no explanation of what qualities the students had that resulted in which appropriate accommodations. This missing information would be an insightful addition to the overall findings of this study. In general, based on this study and others previously discussed, it can be determined that more research is obviously needed; however, selecting appropriate accommodations for ELLs is critical. According to this research, of the promising accommodations available, dictionaries/glossaries and decreasing linguistic complexity are proven to be valid for ELLs on large-scale assessments.

### **Linguistic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities on English/Language Arts Content Area Assessments**

Having discussed research on accommodations for ELLs on content area assessments, another angle that presents itself when considering accommodations for ELLs with disabilities is to look more closely at linguistic accommodations on English/Language Arts content area assessments offered to students receiving special education or related services. It is essential first to specify eligibility for special education and related services. According to the Office of

Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, to be eligible for special education, a child must have a disability and must need special education services. If a child has a disability but does not need special education services, the child is not eligible for special education under IDEA but may be eligible for protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The determination of a child's eligibility for special education must be based upon two notions: first, consideration of all the relevant information pertaining to the child's educational needs; and second, the findings of a multidisciplinary assessment where no single test or single observation is the sole determining factor. The assessment must be conducted by qualified personnel who are competent in the child's primary language or mode of communication, and have a knowledge and understanding of the cultural and ethnic background of the pupil. To be declared eligible, the assessment data must indicate that a disability is evident which adversely affects the students' educational performance, despite school-based corrections and modifications. According to IDEA, students are eligible to receive special education services under one of the disability categories that must be identified by the team that creates the IEP.

To investigate the available literature concerning accommodations for students with disabilities, particularly language related disabilities on large scale English/Language Arts assessments, a search in four databases was completed. Those databases include Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Psych Info. The following search terms were used: *Language Delay and Accommodations*, *Language Accommodation*, *Linguistic Accommodation*, *Language Arts Assessments*, *English Assessments*, *Language Delay and Large Scale Assessments*, *Linguistic Accommodations and Large Scale Assessments*, *Testing Accommodations and Learning Disabilities*, and *Language Accommodations and Learning*



*Disabilities.* Using the search parameters above, six articles were found. Based on the search criteria specified previously in this paper, there was only one article to be included in this review, although the article is in regard to general accommodations instead of being primarily focused on English/Language Arts assessments. This article reported on the five most frequently allowed testing accommodations reported in a literature review of studies conducted after 1990 and focused on grades K-12 and which for research was analyzed for effects of single accommodations (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004). It did not focus specifically on language testing, but reported on accommodations in general. It is reported in the article that based on state accommodation policy information, the analysis showed that the top five accommodations included the following: individual administration (44 states), dictated response to a scribe (43 states), small-group administration (41 states), large print (40 states), Braille (38 states), extended time (37 states), and an interpreter for instructions (36 states). The authors of the article chose to disregard two of the first three listed because they are the most commonly allowed accommodations and are not considered to be highly controversial. That leaves the other five accommodations mentioned above as the focus of the study. The results suggest that extended time was the most frequently investigated (22 studies). Following that was dictated-response (16 studies), large print (4 studies), Braille (2 studies), and interpreter for instructions (2 studies). The analysis of the existing research for each of the aforementioned accommodations, findings produced mixed support and nonsupport. Only dictated-response showed promise for increasing test scores of students with disabilities. It is clear that there is a lack of research on this topic.

## **Participation of and Accommodations for ELLs with Disabilities on ELP Assessments**

When taking into consideration the number of ELLs currently enrolled in schools across the nation, there is a need to look closely at ELLs with disabilities. In fact, in 2003 approximately 9% of ELLs in Kindergarten through Grade 12 were also identified as having a disability and received special education services (Zehler et al., 2003). That percentage has likely increased as our population of ELLs in U.S. schools increases as well. There are many issues to consider when the lines are blurred between English language acquisition and special education services. First and foremost, the identification of an ELL for special education services is the very beginning of a chain reaction of decisions for these students. The psychometric issues involved in testing ELLs for eligibility for special education services are more complex because of the child's level of proficiency both in the first or native language (L1) as well as proficiency in English. Research has clearly demonstrated that assessments designed mainly for native English speakers may not be as reliable and valid for ELLs (Abedi, 2006).

Beyond just the assessment(s) used for eligibility, ELLs entering into special education require coordination with not only special education and classroom teachers, but also ESL teachers/specialists and parents of ELLs who may not be fluent in English or be literate in their native language and/or may have limited formal education themselves. In a qualitative study examining the special education referral and decision-making process for ELLs, data were collected from observations of 21 Child Study Team meetings, 627 classroom observations, and 272 interviews with students, parents, and school personnel (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Overall, researchers found clear patterns including the following: difficulty differentiating between English language acquisition and learning disabilities, confusion about district rules with regard

to when to refer a student for evaluation, misunderstanding lack of ELP as low IQ or a learning disability, overemphasis on test scores throughout the evaluation, limited use of pre-referral strategies, uncertainty about which test(s) to use, heavy reliance on untrained bilingual assessors, negativity towards families and inadequate translation services, and overrepresentation prevailed out of uncertainty (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Of potential misclassifications, learning disabilities are the most common (Abedi, 2006; Case & Taylor, 2005). “ELLs bring into the classroom diverse cultures, languages, and literacy experiences that cannot be easily factored into the equation driving a definition of learning disability” (Case & Taylor, 2005, p. 127). Common characteristics in language development of ELLs and students with learning disabilities occurs in pronunciation (omissions, substitutions, and additions); syntax (negation, word order, and mood); and semantics (forms of figurative language such as proverbs, metaphors, and similes) (Case & Taylor, 2005). Misclassification of a learning disability particular to reading levels can occur for low English proficiency ELLs because of linguistic features that impact comprehension, especially due to unfamiliar words, long phrases in questions, complex sentences, conditional/adverbial clauses, long noun phrases, relative clauses, prepositional phrases, passive voice, and negation (Abedi, 2006).

Another consideration of assessments used to determine eligibility for special education services is the potential for cultural bias of test items and the language of the test(s) used (Abedi, 2006). Although cultural sensitivity is often part of the item review process, cultural bias of test items can prohibit students’ understanding of or access to test items. Also, depending on how the test was translated (e.g., direct translation, translation by a native speaker), the language of the test is a concern (Abedi, 2006).

It is also important to consider the limitations of ELP assessments discussed previously. Based on research regarding ELP tests pre-NCLB and post-NCLB with a focus on the current state of affairs for quality ELP assessments, it is recommended that SEAs require LEAs to use multiple criteria for assessing ELLs' level of ELP, particularly for high-stakes decisions such as classification, reclassification, or exiting as well as for LEAs to make informed decisions about ELLs' participation in statewide content area assessments, including use of accommodations (Abedi, 2008).

In summary, there is still much research to be done regarding ELP assessments, accommodations, and identification of ELLs in need of special education services. There is still uncertainty about the validity of ELP assessments, appropriate accommodations for ELLs, and the proper identification of ELLs with special needs. Although questions regarding those issues exist, enrollment of ELLs and the classification of ELLs with special needs continue. By designation of being an ELL, participation in the annual ELP assessment is required, whether the ELL has special needs or not. When a child is both an ELL and has special needs and is required to take an annual ELP assessment, what considerations should be made?

### **Participation and Accommodations for ELLs with Disabilities on Federally-Mandated Statewide ELP Assessments**

To investigate the available literature concerning accommodations provided for ELP assessment of ELLs with special needs, a search in four databases was completed. Those databases include Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Psych Info. The following search terms were used: *English Language Learner, Special Needs, Special Education, Disability, Accommodations, and English Language Proficiency Assessment*. Using

the search parameters specified previously, only two articles from peer reviewed journals fit the topic and will be discussed and reviewed.

In one article regarding universal design considerations for improving student achievement on ELP assessments, researchers provided information making ELP assessments more accessible to students (Lui & Anderson, 2008). Using a modified Delphi approach, a team of 33 experts from the fields of assessment, ESL, and special education rated a set of accessible test design considerations. Results provided were from two rounds of ratings for which they presented the top 10 and bottom 10 considerations when reviewing test items of ELP test items. Raters agreed that concise and readable text had the greatest relevance to universal design on ELP assessments. By using an expert panel in which those involved could provide ratings based on their experience, guidance is provided that addresses the challenges in test design. The expert panel is one way to get at that guidance; however, classroom teachers (end users of the guidance) were not involved. With that in mind, it seemed that the guidance presented was agreed upon by experts for use in theory, but not practice. Much of the guidance seemed to be a trade off compromise: If one change was made to an item to reflect high ratings in one category, it tended to compromise another issue on test design. Overall, this study did provide suggestions and guidance, but it would be up to states and ELP test developers on how to put that guidance into practice at the test item level.

The requirement that ELLs participate in annual ELP assessment comes from NCLB, but the execution of this requirement is handled by individual states. Every state has its own policies on ELP assessment and guidelines for assessment and accommodations. In 2006, a study was done to identify and examine patterns and variations across states of assessment guidelines and

accommodations for students with disabilities taking the statewide ELP assessment. Through this study, an important gap in the literature was identified (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). The results of the study showed that states are still in the beginning stages of attending to the participation of ELLs with disabilities on the annual ELP assessment. Researchers in this study sought to answer three important questions: (a) How many states have accommodation guidelines for ELLs with disabilities for their ELP assessments? (b) What criteria are states recommending for accommodation decisions for ELP assessments? and (c) What accommodations are allowed or prohibited for ELP assessments? The results of the study showed that 31 states provided some form of documentation for participation or accommodation of ELLs with disabilities on state ELP assessments. The most common decision-making criteria for ELP assessment participation or accommodations used by half of the states was the IEP, the 504 Plan, or a decision for the ELP team (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). Results for accommodations that are provided and prohibited are presented in tables under the following categories: presentation accommodations, response accommodations, equipment accommodations, scheduling or timing accommodations, and setting accommodations. The majority of accommodations for ELP assessments have commonalities with those for the regular state content assessments, suggesting that states need to consider that some students taking the ELP assessment could have various disabilities and consideration of accommodations must be given to all four domains of the assessment (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Overall, results show that ELP assessments are limited in their construction and accommodations may not level the playing field for particular domains. ELP assessments must be accessible to all ELLs if all

ELLs are required to participate, including those with deafness, blindness, and those with significant cognitive disabilities.

Albus and Thurlow (2008) provided a thorough explanation of ELP assessment participation of ELLs with disabilities. Researchers looked at policy and guidelines from all 50 states and provided comprehensive and in-depth results on participation and accommodations across the nation. They were limited by using the information available on state websites, but did follow-up specific states on any policies that were unclear. Another limitation is that this study was completed in 2006. States are constantly changing their ELP assessment. For example, according to their website, in 2009, the WIDA Consortium, which provides a commonly used ELP assessment for state consortium members, now has 20 states that are members and using the assessment. In 2006, this number was much less. As states change their assessment system and/or standards, policies and participation guidelines are often updated as well. This would suggest that the results of this study should be updated to capture the most current results. Authors of this study acknowledge and encourage further investigation and research for students with disabilities taking ELP assessments (Albus & Thurlow, 2008).

### **Summary of the Related Areas of Literature**

ELLs' participation in content area assessments is one area from which knowledge can be gained on how they participate and what accommodations are used, per content area.

Accommodations such as the use of dictionaries or glossaries and decreasing linguistic complexity have proven valid in several studies presented here (Abedi et al., 2001; Albus et al., 2005; Kopriva et al., 2007; Rivera & Stansfield, 2003). Unfortunately, literature concerning linguistic accommodations for students with disabilities on English/Language Arts content area

assessments is extremely limited, but research done in this area would be another resource from which to draw as it relates to accommodations on language-based assessments.

Across the three different areas of research presented in this review, there are some common limitations. First, the majority of research on accommodations for ELLs either on content area or ELP assessments is based on a majority of subjects who are Hispanic. Research on other culture and/or language groups is a definite area of need. Also, for accommodations research on content area assessments, mathematics is the most researched content area. More research is needed in other content areas for students using accommodations of decreased linguistic complexity as well as bilingual dictionaries. Finally, no matter what kind of assessment or accommodations, a way to track use of accommodations provided to students needs to be developed. Research documented in this report does not comment on actual use of the accommodation, just whether or not it was provided. As the ELL population continues to grow and testing of this group of students continues, hopefully, more consideration will be given to these limitations.

Based on the literature presented, there is a need for more research of accommodations for ELLs and for students with disabilities. Particularly, when a student is both an ELL and has a disability, research has not yet caught up with how to disentangle and understand the differences between disability-related and language-learning characteristics of these students. Initial research has told us that sometimes the differences between the disability-related needs and language-learning needs are confounded by the interaction between the two, making it all the more confusing for policy makers and practitioners (Barrera, 2008). With studies like those presented here providing the current state of affairs of accommodations for ELLs with



disabilities across the nation and expert recommendations on accommodations that should be used, there is some research on which to base further investigation.

### **Discussion and Implications of Corpus of Literature**

Much focus on ELLs and students with disabilities has been on how to tell the difference between the two types of educational needs along with how students should participate in statewide content area assessments and with which accommodations (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). Perhaps this has been the focus because of the effect those students' participation rates and test scores affect Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). It is evident based on this literature review that less attention has been devoted to ELLs with disabilities and how they participate and which accommodations are provided for them on required statewide ELP assessments. Although less in the limelight than AYP, for Title III requirements meeting AMAO 1 and 2 are critical for school districts to receive Title III funds. Currently, when questioned about how a student with deafness should participate in the listening and speaking section, the ESL Coordinator at the Virginia Department of Education responded that those students could not participate and would receive a score of zero for both sections (J. Radford, personal communication, October 9, 2009). When questioned further, the state specialist explained that those scores of zero would in fact impact AMAO 1 and 2. If a school district with a small number of ELLs has any student who gets scores of zeros, that directly relates to a decrease in Title III funds for the school district. By the lack of research and limited guidance from Title III at the federal level on issues regarding ELLs with disabilities, it is clear that much more research and attention to this matter are necessary.

By replicating the study explained earlier (Albus & Thurlow, 2008) in which an inventory of what SEAs are requiring/allowing with regard to ELLs with disabilities and accommodations, a more current picture of the status of implementation at the state and local level can be provided. What could be added to that study is collecting data on the research basis that states are using to create the test participation requirements and/or allowable accommodations list. The point of interest in doing so would be the “why” behind what states are requiring and/or allowing. Information from such a study would benefit both practitioners and policy makers as well as influence further research. It would benefit practitioners in that by knowing why an accommodation should be used or allowed, a practitioner could prepare students throughout the school year by using the accommodation to acclimate students to it as well to influence differentiated instruction for students who are both ELLs and have special needs. At the policy level, this research would provide a solid foundation and rationale for certain accommodations instead of simply borrowing a list from special education and using that list for ELLs, as has been done in the past. Finally, it could influence further research by providing an account of what is currently being used and why, with the intention that future research could look more specifically at each accommodation and study useful accommodations more in-depth with experimental designs.

What is currently missing from the research is the reality of how ELLs with disabilities are participating in annual statewide ELP assessments through an “on the ground” lens. How does the requirement play out for real students in schools around the nation? Of note would be which ELLs with which disabilities are provided with which accommodations on which domains of the test. Are there patterns among disability groups or language groups? Overall, the federal

government has set requirements, but how the requirements are put into practice has not yet been investigated on a statewide or national level. As reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) approaches, there is no better time to work on determining the truth about how these requirements play out in schools and examine any unintended consequences that could result.

The proposed study will contribute to the existing literature by providing an analysis of one state's data from the statewide ELP assessment. Within the analysis, the author will discuss which ELLs with which disabilities are provided particular accommodations. There is currently no research describing the population of test takers with specific disabilities and which accommodations are provided in relation to their disabilities on the ELP assessment. The author will investigate possible relationships between specific disabilities and particular accommodations as well as factors that contribute to those relationships. The data used from the state will offer a realistic picture of how this subgroup is participating in a statewide mandated assessment under federal requirements and will provide insight into how these requirements are actuated at the classroom level.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY**

The focus of the research for this study was on accommodations for ELLs with disabilities in their participation on federally-mandated statewide ELP assessments. The study included four research questions:

1. What accommodations are used for ELLs with disabilities in statewide ELP assessments?
2. Is there a relationship between the disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
3. Is there a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievements on ELP assessments? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
4. What are perceptions that exist on accommodations on annual ELP assessments for the specific population of ELLs with disabilities among state, district, and classroom level educational professionals?

### **Design**

This study is exploratory because very limited data exist in the literature about the target variables. Both quantitative and qualitative research will be applied to address the research questions. One element of the study is quantitative research study and will incorporate the use of

descriptive statistics using a secondary dataset. This will provide a deeper look into the subgroup of ELLs with disabilities to go beyond what current literature provides. To address the second research question, the researcher will use chi square statistics to investigate possible relationships between specific disability categories of ELLs and specific types of accommodations they were provided on the annual ELP assessment. For example, the researcher might look at the disability category of deaf or hard of hearing and the accommodation used for the listening section of the test. If possible relationships are found between specific disabilities of ELLs and specific accommodations, the researcher will follow up with interviews to examine contributing factors to the identified relationships. Hierarchical multiple regression models will be applied to address question 3. Factors that may contribute to the potential relationships include length of time in ELL program, type of ELL program, native language, proficiency level prior to testing, and grade level. Again, interviews will be used as follow-up to examine contributing factors to the identified relationships. The fourth question will be addressed through the responses of interviewees proposed in the qualitative element of this study.

The findings from the quantitative analysis above were one element of this study; however, to provide further context about possible relationships and factors found between specific disabilities and accommodations, and how accommodations might affect ELLs' achievements on ELP tests, qualitative research in the form of a case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) was used to provide potential explanations for those relationships and factors. A phenomenological qualitative research design was used for this element of the study.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with state and school personnel for the qualitative portion of this study. Discussion questions have been developed to serve as a

guideline for the interviews. The guiding questions of this study along with follow-up questions will be based on both the literature review regarding ELLs with disabilities and accommodations as well as the findings from the quantitative research completed by the researcher for this study (see Appendix A). Eight interviews will be completed for the qualitative research and the responses from the interviews will be coded and analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). The guiding questions for the interviews will be adapted to reflect the nature of the questions to the specific interviewee. The protocol will be adjusted based in the interviewees' professional title/role. The researcher will hold the following interviews at the state level: State ELL Coordinator, State Director of Special Education, and State Assessment Director. The three interviewees are chosen because they each represent a particular angle or lens of the research being completed; the ELL Coordinator brings her perspective on ELLs, the Director of Special Education offers her focus on students with disabilities, and the Assessment Director brings her angle on testing and accommodations. Because the test is federally mandated and implementation comes from the state, state level officials are most connected to test administration across the state. The protocol will also be used for the following interviews at the school level with administrators: Title III Coordinator, Director of Special Education, and School Testing Director. These three interviewees are chosen because they, like the state level personnel described above, represent a specific angle of the research being completed and create an additional element of credibility to this research (Bratlinger et al., 2005). Finally, two additional interviews will be completed with experienced (3 plus years of teaching and test administration) teachers of ELLs with disabilities to gain perspective from the personnel who most frequently administer the assessment to the target population.

## **Population**

As mentioned above, statewide data were used for the quantitative element of this study, specifically, the ELP assessment data from the state of Virginia. The population is ELLs with disabilities in Virginia and this study will use the entire population's data. The comparability of the Virginia data to other states is strong for two reasons. First, Virginia belongs to a consortium called the World-Class Instructional Design (WIDA) Consortium. Every member of that consortium uses the same ELP standards and the same ELP statewide annual assessment. Twenty-two other states belong to that consortium; therefore, Virginia's test data are comparable to the other consortium member states. Also, Virginia has a fairly similar population of ELLs to the population of ELLs in many states across the nation. These two strengths in comparability to other states suggest that findings from this study could influence future studies in other states and nationwide. The data for the 2009-2010 school year shows that 52,517 ELLs took the ACCESS test. The total population of ELLs in Virginia is larger than the number of ELLs who took the test because the test data provided by the Virginia Department of Education is only for students in grades 3 through 12. The VDOE reported that the majority of ELLs in Virginia are from Spanish-speaking countries, but the population varies and includes speakers of over 100 different native languages (VDOE, 2009). Data from the ACCESS test from the 2009-2010 school year shows that 24,061 test takers are Spanish speakers. Following that, the next two largest language groups are 1,841 Korean speakers and 1,796 Vietnamese speakers. Table 1 shows the population of test takers by grade level. Due to the nature of relationship between instruction and assessment, it is also noteworthy to consider the type of English language services/instruction

Table 1

*Population of ACCESS Test-Takers by Grade Level*

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Grade level	Population
3	8,771
4	7,697
5	6,686
6	6,204
7	5,672
8	4,810
9	4,112
10	3,406
11	3,470
12	1,665

---

Note. There were 24 students for whom grade was not properly coded.



provided to the students. Table 2 shows the type of instruction received by test-taking ELLs in Virginia for the 2009-2010 school year.

Table 2

*Type of Instruction Received by Test-Taking ELLS in Virginia, 2009-2010*

Type of ELL service	Number of students receiving service
Pull-out ESL	3,997
Content-based ESL	3,278
Sheltered English instruction	2,824
Sheltered English immersion	2,770
Inclusionary support	1,405
Pull-out for individualized support	1,220
Content area tutoring	237
Self-contained instruction	220
Heritage language instruction	17

Note. Not all students' test records included a code for ELL services and more than one service could be coded.

Finally, it is important to consider the length of time the test takers have been enrolled as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and how long they have been enrolled. Table 3 shows ELLs' length of enrollment time.

Table 3

*Number of Years Enrolled as Limited English Proficient (LEP)*

---

Number of years enrolled as LEP	Number of students
Less than 1 year	25,463
1 year	3,964
2 years	3,481
3 years	5,227
4 years	4,589
5 years	3,355
6 years	2,454
7 years	1,606
8 years	1,105
9 years	702
10 years	536
11 years	26
12 years	5
13 years	3
16 years	1

As explained above, the particular population of focus for this study was ELLs in Virginia with disabilities. It is a NCLB requirement that all ELLs have their ELP assessed annually on a statewide assessment. With this in mind, all ELLs with disabilities must be assessed with the same ELP assessment. In 2009, 5.9% of all students with disabilities were ELLs with disabilities in Virginia (P. Raskopf, personal Communication, April 13, 2010). The data that were used in this study reflect scores and other assessment demographic information for ELLs with disabilities on the federally-mandated annual statewide ELP assessment in Virginia.

### **Sampling**

The qualitative portion of this study involving eight interviews with state and school level personnel was a purposive sample. The state-level administrators are the three administrators who are most closely connected to the student population of interest. By function of the positions of these three administrators, they were chosen specifically for their expertise at the state level. The district chosen for the school administrator and teacher interviews was also a purposive sample. This district has a moderate number of ELLs, not the largest and not the smallest in the state, and generally mirrors the mean of the majority of ELLs in other districts around the state. The ELL population at the district is very diverse and also has a balanced number of ELLs at the elementary and secondary levels. Similar to the state interviews, the administrators who were interviewed are those most closely connected to the population of interest through function of their position as a school administrator. The two teachers were representative of both the elementary and secondary levels (one from each) and both have 3 or more years of ELL teaching experience along with experience with administering the statewide ELP assessment with accommodations.

## **Instrumentation**

The primary instrument for the quantitative element of this study is the ELP assessment used in Virginia called ACCESS for ELLs through the WIDA Consortium (Meritech, 2007). The assessment will be explained in further detail in this section. Key features of the assessment include the following: It assesses the four language domains by grade clusters and items link to content standards. The qualitative element of this study will incorporate a protocol for interviews as the instrument used to collect data, explained at the end of this section. As noted above, Virginia uses the ACCESS for ELLs produced by the WIDA Consortium for the annual federally-mandated assessment. This assessment has been administered for the last 3 years in Virginia as the annual ELP assessment. All ELLs in Virginia are required to take this assessment. This assessment is typically offered in the spring. During school year 2009-2010, school divisions in Virginia had two testing windows of administration: January 25-19, 2010 through March 19, 2010 and March 15, 2010 through May 7, 2010. The testing window for the 2008-2009 administration of the ACCESS was also January through May. The ACCESS for ELLs test is based on the WIDA ELP standards, which incorporate performance indicators for each standard. Also, according to NCLB, ELP standards must link to content areas and include academic language. The ACCESS for ELLs test incorporates five different content areas: social and instructional language, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies/history.

### **Domains**

The Access for ELLs is has four domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students must be tested in all four domains.

## **Test Administration and Administration Times**

Test administrators are typically teachers or other school staff who assist with test administration. Test administrators are trained through an annual training provided by the Virginia Department of Education through the WIDA Consortium. Training is done virtually through an online meeting. During the test administrators are expected to follow the testing procedures specified in the testing manual and from their training.

The listening section of the test takes about 20-25 minutes to administer and is machine scored. The speaking section of the test takes up to 15 minutes to administer. It is administered individually and scored by the administrator. The reading section takes 30-60 minutes to administer and is machine scored. The writing section takes up to 1 hour to administer and is scored by trained raters.

## **Scoring and Weights per Domain**

When tests are complete, the teacher submits the tests to the official at the school collecting test materials. The test materials are then submitted to the company chosen by the consortium for scoring.

The scoring of the tests is done differently depending on which section/domain is being scored. The listening and reading domains are machine scored. The writing domain is scored by trained scorers hired by the testing company. The speaking domain is scored during the actual testing section by the test administrator. Raw scores and scale scores are provided along with all of the coded demographic information about each student. The scores also convert into a particular proficiency level. This is done for each domain as well as overall scores for the test, but reading and writing are each worth 35% of the score and listening and speaking are each

worth 15% of the score. The testing company then provides those scores to the Virginia Department of Education and to school divisions.

### Grade Clusters

ELLs in grades K-12 are required to participate in the annual statewide ELP assessment. Due to the varying degree of cognitive development and the developmental levels of children in general grades K-12, the ACCESS test has five different grade levels: Pre-K-K, 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

### Tiers and Proficiency Levels

Also, due to different ELP levels of students, the test has three different tiers: A, B, and C (see Figure 2). There are six proficiency levels according to the WIDA Consortium and the

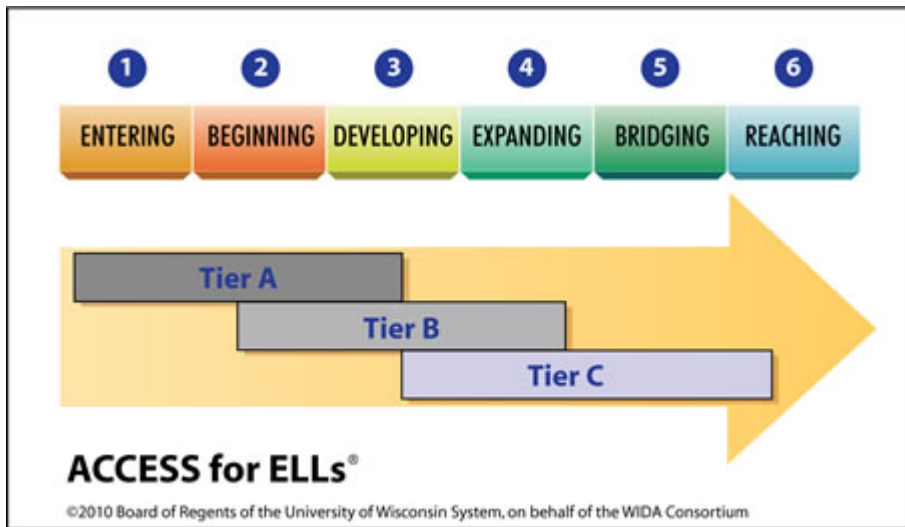


Figure 2. ACCESS for ELLs.

ACCESS test: entering, beginning, developing, expanding, bridging, and reaching. In order to maintain a reasonable number of items on each test section and to hone in on what students know and can do, students at particular levels take a specific tier of the test. Students with ELP levels

of entering, beginning, and developing take tier A; students with ELP levels of beginning, developing, and expanding take tier B; and students with ELP levels of developing, bridging, and reaching take tier C. All of the proficiency levels are on a continuum and WIDA acknowledges the likely overlap from one proficiency level to the next.

The other focus of this study was qualitative in nature in which interview data was used. A protocol of guiding questions was developed and used for eight different semistructured interviews (3 state-level personnel, 3 school-level administrators, and 2 teachers of ELLs with experience in administering the assessment), although the questions were oriented towards the professional role of each interviewee. The guiding questions were developed through the literature review and were reviewed by a qualitative research expert. The questions were based on the results of the data from the quantitative part of this study and the potential relationships identified between specific disabilities and specific accommodations (explained previously in this chapter). The protocol was piloted with one state and one school-level administrator to refine the guiding questions before they were used for the interviews.

### **Procedure**

For this study, the researcher used existing data that were collected by the VDOE for the annual statewide ELP assessment, ACCESS for ELLs, from the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years. The secondary dataset was obtained by contacting the Virginia Department of Education Director of Assessment and requesting the ACCESS data. The researcher analyzed the data using the SPSS and provided descriptive statistics, chi square statistics, and findings from conducting a univariate analysis of variance to address the research questions. Based on the data analysis, the researcher then provided a discussion of the results. Any missing data were

noted in the results and were addressed through follow-up with interview questions to the state-level interviewees. The researcher plans to provide the results, a presentation, and/or a report to the VDOE and the school district in the future. The data for the ACCESS for ELLs assessment are unrestricted information, but the data for the ACCESS for ELLs were obtained without student-level identifiers. Confidentiality was respected throughout this study. Social validity (Kvale, 1976) of the results is in keeping with the idea that no research similar to this study has been done. Due to the requirement of NCLB under Title III that all ELLs participate in the annual ELP assessment, there is potential concern for access to the assessment for those ELLs with disabilities.

For the interviews conducted for this study, the responses from the eight in-person interviews were digitally recorded. Each interviewee represented a different perspective within the realm of this study, in a case-study structure, including state-level, school administrator-level, and teaching personnel. Three interviews with state-level personnel, three school administrator-level personnel, and two teachers of ELLs with experience in administering the assessment were completed. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. The three state-level interviewees included the following officials from the VDOE: the Title III Coordinator, the Director of Special Education, and the Assessment Director. The three school-level interviewees included the same type of personnel as used for the state-level interviews: the Title III Coordinator, the Director of Special Education, and the School Testing Coordinator. The two teachers interviewed are experienced teachers of ELLs with disabilities who also have experience in administering the assessment (see Table 4). For confidentiality purposes, the district and schools shall remain unnamed; however, it should be noted that the



Table 4

*Interviewees and Years of Experience*

Professional role	Years employed in that role
Assistant Superintendent for Student Assessment and School Improvement for the Virginia Department of Education	9.5 years
ESL Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Education	4 years
Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services for the Virginia Department of Education	11 years
Division Director of Testing for Henrico County Public Schools	2 years
Educational Specialist for English as a Second Language and World Languages for Henrico County Public Schools	8 years
Director of Exceptional Education and Support Services for Henrico County Public Schools	6 months
ESL Teacher, Secondary, Henrico County Public Schools	5 years
ESL Teacher, Elementary, Henrico County Public Schools	7 years

district has about 3,000 ELLs. The district was chosen as a purposive sample, as it mirrors the population in many districts across Virginia. Both schools from which teachers were interviewed have high ELL populations compared to other schools in the district.

The researcher contacted the three interviewees at the state-level and requested their participation in a short interview. For the school-and classroom-level interviewees, the researcher contacted the district and followed district procedures to contact interviewees for their participation. Participant consent was obtained from each of the eight interviewees by following the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved procedure. The same interview protocol was used for each interviewee, with adjustments for each interviewee's specific professional role. The questions for the protocol were developed based on the literature review and data analysis of the quantitative focus of this study (the ACCESS for ELLs ELP assessment data). The questions for the interview protocol provide member checking between participants. The researcher also probed for potential verification of or support for the results of the analysis. The researcher transcribed the interviews and then completed content analysis of the transcriptions. The researcher presents the themes and highlights of the interviews in the results section (Chapter 4) of the study. The names of the interviewees were not included in the results, only their professional titles.

The researcher submitted the application and necessary review paperwork to IRB through the Virginia Commonwealth University Research Office for both foci of the study and the application was approved prior to data collection.

## **Data Analysis**

Three different types of analysis were used to examine the test score data. First, to identify the specific types of disabilities of ELLs participating in the assessment and to describe specific accommodations provided to students with specific disabilities, descriptive statistics were used. More specifically, the total number and mean are provided. Next, to examine possible relationships between specific disabilities of ELLs and specific accommodations offered to ELLs with specific disabilities on the ELP assessment, chi square statistics were used. Chi square statistics were conducted because the dependent and independent variables for this question are categorical. Relationships found between specific disabilities of ELLs and specific accommodations were addressed through the interviews. For research question 3, univariate analysis of variance was conducted. Also, the researcher conducted a regression analysis to explore factors that contribute to relationships between achievement on the assessment and accommodations (covariates were grade and length of time in ELL program). Interviews further explored this question for contributing factors.

With regard to the qualitative data, interviews provided different perspectives and allowed the researcher to collect additional information about the potential relationships identified through the quantitative analysis. The researcher sought to provide results that are credible and trustworthy. To analyze the qualitative data, the researcher examined the transcriptions for key words and phrases related to each of the research questions and compiled a list of quotes related to each research question. When presenting the results, the researcher will summarize related statements and present direct quotes by research question. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher was able to triangulate the data, which

offered research validity (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In terms of reliability, particularly for the qualitative data, the researcher ensured that transcriptions and coding were deemed accurate by an additional researcher's review.

### **Limitations**

While this study would be a unique contribution to the current body of literature that exists, there are several limitations to this study. This study employs the use of a secondary data set. This is an exploratory study of testing data provided by the VDOE. There is no intervention and, consequently, no experimental design with random selection. This exploratory study seeks to identify variables or factors that will allow for future research with more rigid design.

A final limitation to the research is that the data is limited to the accommodations that are provided to the students. Although the accommodations are provided, there is no way of accounting for use of the accommodations by the students. It is quite possible that an accommodation is counted as provided, but is not actually used or used infrequently by the student. Future research in this area should include tracking actual use of the accommodations provided to students, which can be done particularly through the use of online assessment. Oregon is currently exploring this option as is likely for other states as online ELP assessment becomes more common.

For the qualitative element to this study, the interviews have certain limitations as well. Again, the content of the interviews are specific to Virginia and those interviewed are employees of the VDOE and a school district in Virginia. The responses may include bias towards a particular group of students or the affiliation of each of their professional roles. For the state-level interviews, two of the interviewees have been in their roles for at least 10 years, one

person has been in the role for less than 1 year. With this in mind, there may be different levels of understanding and historical knowledge of the agency between the interviewees. At the school-level, the interviewees provided responses based on just one specific district/school. The interview questions allow for member checking and triangulation of data from the interviewees' different perspectives.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the population of English language learners (ELLs) who have disabilities and explore the assessment of their English language proficiency (ELP). Specifically, the researcher explored the use of accommodations for ELLs with disabilities and ELLs' performance on the federally-mandated ELP assessment. The study involved the collection of both quantitative data from an ELP assessment as well as qualitative interviews with state-level administrators, school-level administrators, and classroom teachers who have administered the assessment. The quantitative data including the ELP of all ELLs in Virginia from the 2009-2010 school year were provided by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). The federally-mandated annual ELP assessment used in Virginia is the ACCESS for ELLs produced by the WIDA Consortium. As described in Chapter 3, ELLs participating in the ACCESS for ELLs assessment include 52,517 students, with the lower grade levels having the most ELLs. The majority of the ELL population receives Pull Out instruction (3,997), Content-based Instruction (3,278), Sheltered English Instruction (2,824), and Sheltered English Immersion (2,770). Overwhelmingly, ELLs with 1 year or less of English instruction received the highest frequency of English instruction by years (25,463 with 1 year or less of instruction). The three most frequent language backgrounds were Spanish (24,061), Korean (1,841), and Vietnamese (1,796). The qualitative interview data were collected from the VDOE and a Virginia school division with a population of about 2,000 ELLs (about 3% of the entire

student population). This percentage of ELLs mirrors mid-range school division ELL populations from a variety of nationalities and languages represented. The interviews were completed during February and March of 2011.

Several steps were taken in preparation for analyzing both the quantitative and qualitative data for this study. The quantitative data provided by the VDOE were analyzed using SPSS. The qualitative interview data were collected by the researcher which were recorded and transcribed. To ensure proper transcription, 25% of the transcriptions were reviewed by a doctoral student and 100% agreement was reached. A list of general themes was generated from the interview transcription. The researcher used an inductive approach to analyzing the interview data. The list of categories included understanding of the law, accommodations for specific disabilities, accommodations and achievement on the assessment, and opinions about reauthorization of the law, from which themes could emerge and related evidence from each interview could be extracted. The transcriptions were coded for emergent themes in an iterative process (Glesne, 1999). For each piece of related evidence, the researcher documented the interview and line number for the location of specific evidence in the transcription. The researcher read each transcription several times to be sure that all evidence related to each category was extracted. When reporting the results, the researcher used an inductive coding strategy (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to analyze the data and to document common responses from different interviewees to organize the themes. The researcher also noted in several places where there was a lack of knowledge, for example, when several interviewees said they did not know and instances where they gave conflicting information. The coded interview data from 25% of the interviews was reviewed by a doctoral student and 100% agreement of the coding was

reached. The results of this investigation are explained below according to each research question that was developed for this study.

### **Research Question 1**

*What accommodations are used for ELLs with disabilities in statewide ELP assessments?*

#### **Quantitative Results**

To explore which accommodations were used for ELLs with disabilities in annual statewide ELP assessments, the researcher used the ACCESS for ELLs assessment data provided by the VDOE. Prior to the researcher receiving the data, students' names were removed and the student identifier from the statewide achievement tests was used to code disability status for the ELP assessment data. Students' primary disability was used to code disability status. For ELLs with disabilities, accommodations to be used on the assessment are documented in the IEP. Students were allowed to use more than one accommodation. Accommodations provided to students on the ACCESS for ELLs assessment were recorded by the test administrator and reported in the assessment data. The WIDA Consortium, developer of the ACCESS for ELLs, provided a list of approved accommodations for the assessment. Accommodations must be approved in order to provide them on the assessment.

There is a large span of frequencies of the disability status codes on the ACCESS for ELLs. Although there are only a few students coded or none at all for some disabilities, there are four that are represented more than others across the state. The four most common disabilities codes include the following: Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Speech or Language Impairment, and Other/Health Impairment (see Table 5). To clarify the meaning of Other/Health Impairment, according to the VDOE and IDEA, the Other/Health Impairment code refers to



Table 5

*Disability Status Codes on ACCESS for ELLs*

Disability status code	Total number
Deaf-blind	1
Traumatic brain injury	11
Developmental delay	12
Mental retardation	14
Multiple disabilities	20
Visual impairment (including blindness)	27
Intellectual disabilities	31
Orthopedic impairment	35
Hearing impairment/deaf	78
Otherwise qualified handicapped under Section 504	198
Autism	211
Emotional disturbance	223
Other health impairment	550
Speech/language impairment	953
Learning disability	4,638
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,002</b>

having limited strength, vitality or alertness. This includes a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment and which adversely affects a child's educational performance (asthma, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, Tourette syndrome, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, or heart conditions). As noted in Chapter 3, it is beyond the scope of this study to validate the disability status codes. The codes are assigned at the school level and students are labeled through the referral process implemented by the school district.

There are 10 different accommodations provided to students according to specifications in the IEP. Based on administrators' coding of accommodations provided, frequencies in Table 6 show the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities on the ACCESS test. According to the WIDA Consortium, Other Accommodation refers to certain practices that can reduce testing anxiety for students (verbal praise, tangible reinforcement, practice tests or examples before the test administration). More than one accommodation can be provided to students. As noted in Chapter 3, although accommodations are provided to students, this does not guarantee that students use the accommodations provided. The most common accommodations provided were Modified Test Directions, Modified Timing/Scheduling, Other Accommodation, and Modified Presentation Format, shown in Table 6.

### **Qualitative Results**

Data collected from the qualitative interviews confirmed that Modified Test Directions, Modified Timing/Scheduling, Other Accommodation, and Modified Presentation Format were common accommodations typically used for ELLs with disabilities. Modified Timing/

Table 6

*Accommodations Provided to Students on ACCESS for ELLs*

Accommodation type	Total number of students being provided with accommodation
Large print booklet	1
Magnification or low vision aid	1
Braille	3
Audio amplification	4
Computer assisted	15
Scribe	55
Modified presentation format	220
Other approved accommodation (encouragement, example test questions)	333
Modified timing	367
Modified test directions	445

Scheduling (small group) was noted as important particularly because the teacher can observe the student's frustration level while the student is taking the assessment.

**Challenges in assessing ELLs with disabilities.** Based on data collected during the interview with the state-level administrator of assessment, Braille as an accommodation is a cause for conflict between the state and the WIDA Consortium. If a student is a Braille user and a Braille form is not provided, the Assistant Superintendant questioned how the requirements to assess the student are met. WIDA's assertion is that if the Braille form is allowed, then what is assessed is competence in Braille and not reading. Similarly for deaf students, there is no sign language interpretation for the hearing impaired students. The local-level ESL administrator shared that ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities do not receive ESL services and instead receive language-rich services through special education and that presents challenges for those students being prepared for the assessment and accustomed to accommodations provided. Two educators noted in their interviews that current requirements do not address how to appropriately assess ELLs who are blind, deaf, or who have significant cognitive disabilities and that currently those students cannot take certain parts of the test resulting in a score of 0 which counts against school, district, and state funding.

**Educator understanding of assessment of ELLs with disabilities.** In general, the majority of educators interviewed were aware that assessment requirements exist for ELLs. Of those interviewed, 6 out of 8 educators stated the federal requirements for assessing the ELP of all ELLs, including those with disabilities. It is important to note that interview data suggested that special educators had limited knowledge regarding language acquisition, accommodations for ELLs, and instructional strategies for ELLs; yet, ELL educators appeared more

knowledgeable about disabilities, special education, accommodations, instructional strategies for students with disabilities, and assessment requirements for students with disabilities. The following quote from a special education school-level administrator provides supporting evidence for the imbalance of knowledge among ELL and special education educators:

My understanding and experience is rather limited with this specific population that you are dealing with here. My experience with federally-mandated tests is generally with the state assessments like the SOLs, VAAPs, or VGLAs. It is very limited. In a division the size that ours is, we are able to identify. . . have that responsibility go to one person and that is outside of Exceptional Ed and she handles that pretty exclusively.

We typically include an ESL teacher. If the child is receiving ESL services, certainly the services would be provided by an expert in language and their input on the IEP team would be invaluable.

## **Research Question 2**

*Is there a relationship between the disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?*

### **Quantitative Results**

The data from the ACCESS for ELLs show that frequencies for specific disability categories are more prevalent than others. The data also show that frequencies for specific accommodations provided to ELLs with specific disabilities are provided more often than others. Given these data, the researcher investigated potential relationships between disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with specific disability codes. Furthermore, if a relationship exists, contributing factors to the relationship were also under investigation.

Quantitative data were used to determine the existence of a relationship between disability category and accommodations provided. Qualitative data were used to shed light on possible contributing factors to the relationship.

**Quantitative data.** To determine if a relationship exists between disability category and accommodations provided, the researcher analyzed the data performing a chi-square test. In order to perform the chi-square test, several assumptions must be met. First, the sample must be randomly selected from the population. This assumption is superseded by the fact that the researcher used the entire population instead of randomly selecting from the population. Second, the sample size,  $n$ , must be large enough so that the expected count in each cell is greater than or equal to 5. To meet this assumption, the researcher selected the four accommodations with the greatest frequencies. Accommodations with frequencies below the greatest four frequencies had frequencies of 55 or less. The researcher used the four accommodations with the highest frequencies and whether each was used (yes/no) as the dependent variable and disability status codes as the independent variable. As discussed in the results for the first research question, the four most common disability codes include the following: Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Speech or Language Impairment, and Other/Health Impairment. These four disability codes were used for data analysis as the independent variable because they were the most prevalent across the disability codes. The results of the chi-square test show that Modified Presentation/Format, Modified Timing/Scheduling, and Modified Test Directions each have a significant relationship with the disability status ( $P < .01$ ) (see Table 7).

Table 7

*Chi-Square Test of Four Most Frequent Test Accommodations and Disability Status Codes*

Variables	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>Cramer's V</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> *
Modified presentation/format X	198	24.99	.062	3	.000
Disability status					
Modified timing/scheduling X	274	53.042	.090	3	.000
Disability status					
Modified test directions X	350	64.959	.100	3	.000
Disability status					
Other approved accommodation X	99	17.365	.036	6	.008
Disability status					

\**p* < .01

## **Qualitative Results**

Qualitative data from interviews support that educators of ELLs agree that relationships exist between specific disability categories and types of accommodations provided. In fact, both teacher interviewees reported that some accommodations are good for ELLs with many different disabilities. However, four interviewees did concede that although they believe there are relationships between disability category and accommodations, there are challenges with knowing if the accommodation is for the disability or if it is given because of language issues and challenges with identifying disability from language learning. This concession is consistent with previous research (Abedi, 2006, 2008; Barrera, 2008). Regarding an additional concern involving language level, one interviewee commented:

There is a need to consider the language level of the child ELLs are categorized as 1 through 5 and depending on the language level of the child, you could probably connect these accommodations and the higher the language level of the child, you would probably not use as many accommodations.

**Perceptions of relationships between disability status and accommodations.** Results from qualitative data support that students with certain disabilities commonly use particular accommodations. For Modified Presentation, one interviewee felt that it can be useful for students with learning disabilities, mental retardation, and processing problems. Modified Timing/Scheduling, particularly small group testing, was mentioned by four interviewees as an important accommodation, but each interviewee named a different disability for which it was helpful: one said learning disabled and other health impairment; one said emotionally disturbed;



one said hearing impaired; and another said autistic students. Regarding students with autism, an school-level interviewee said:

Well, for kids who have autism, they need to have flexible scheduling, they need to have one-on-one, they need to have assistance with directions because if you just read directions, they are not going to get it, they are not going to be focused, actually, with autistic kids you have to be really hands on and you have to do a lot of pointing in the directions, you know, that kind of stuff, to refocus them on what they need. They need breaks because, you know, autistic kids do not focus well and so to have sustained focus is just not going to work. Small group or one-on-one is really important because that gives direct presence with the kid. If you have got five kids in the room, they are not going to follow, if you have got one kid and it is just you and one kid, you have much better chances getting him to follow along.

One interviewee explained that extended time for students with reading disabilities is important because it takes longer for these students to process what is read. A school-level administrator did mention that multiple test sessions do present certain logistical issues. Also, a state-level administrator said, "Timing is difficult for many of our students because we have untimed tests in Virginia," in relation to the SOLs (untimed) and the ACCESS test (timed). Two interviewees responded that Modified Directions was a useful accommodation for students with a learning disability and students with autism. Even though the Other Approved Accommodation was not statistically significant, two interviewees each said food and verbal praise were effective accommodations for students who are emotionally disturbed and students with cognitive disabilities.

Some interviewees responded to the prompt regarding relationships between disability status and accommodations with responses that were not 1 of the 4 accommodations with the highest frequencies. Although the number of other accommodations was too small to allow for statistical analysis, the additional qualitative data from the interviews provide important insight. Three interviewees mentioned the usefulness of Dictation to a Scribe for specific disabilities particularly for students who are intellectually disabled, students with dyslexia, and students with hearing impairments. Assistive Technology was also said to be useful for students with hearing impairments, learning disabled students, students with autism, students with dyslexia, and students with speech/language disabilities according to three interviewees. While the Read Aloud accommodation cannot be used on the reading portion of the test (this was not clear to three of the interviewees based on their responses), two interviewees recommended this accommodation for the other domains tested, specifically for students with attention problems, cognitive disabilities, and students with autism. A multisensory approach to assessment was also recommended by one interviewee for students with autism. An obvious connection between Low Vision Aids or Large Print and students with visual impairments was documented by two interviewees as well as Amplification for students with hearing impairments by one interviewee.

**Native language-based accommodations.** There was some confusion between two interviewees regarding the language of the assessment. Specifically, one interviewee noted that the native language of the student could be an accommodation. Another interviewee noted the use of translation for the assessments. These two interviewees seem to be confused about the construct of ELP assessment. Both of these interviewees were from the special education field

and, as noted previously, appear to be less knowledgeable about assessment of ELLs than students with special needs.

**ELLs with significant disabilities.** One interviewee said that there are specific challenges when the disability is so significant that it supersedes language issues. It should be noted that one interviewee responded that for some ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities, a checklist is used to measure English language proficiency. Although this checklist is not widely used, the interviewee provided incorrect information in which the checklist was referred to as an accommodation. The checklist is not an accommodation, but rather a tool that is used in lieu of the ELP assessment. Also, as an aside, two other interviewees said that the WIDA Consortium is developing an alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities and it is currently being field tested.

### **Research Question 3**

*Is there a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievement on ELP tests? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?*

### **Quantitative Results**

In order to analyze whether there is a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievements on the ELP test, the researcher conducted a factor analysis using univariate analysis of variance with the quantitative assessment dataset. The independent variables were disability status (of the highest four frequencies of disability categories: learning disabled, speech/language impairment, other health impairment, and emotional disturbance) and accommodation provided. For both the disability category and the accommodation provided, the researcher used the four highest frequencies for each variable to

address the most prevalent disabilities and accommodations across the state. The dependent variable was the composite scale score on the ELP test. Results suggest that there is no significant relationship between accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievement on the ELP assessment ( $P > .05$ ). In fact, results show that students with disabilities who did not use accommodations on the assessment actually scored better than those who used accommodations across almost all the four disability status codes (see Table 8). There were two exceptions to these results in which students with the disability code of Other Health Impairment scored slightly better with modified test directions than those without modified test directions, and students with the disability code of Emotional Disturbance scored slightly better with Other Approved Accommodation than without the Other Approved Accommodation. Although a small percentage of variance in scores could be explained by the use of specific accommodations and by disability status type, there was no interaction effect because no significant relationships were found between disability status and accommodation and score ( $P > .05$ ) (see Table 9).

In addition to examining the effects of accommodation types and disability status on ELLs' scale scores, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to further identify any additional factors/variables that might predict ELLs' ELP assessment scores. The researcher ran a regression first using grade and then length of time in the ELL program as predictors with overall scale score as the dependent variable. Results from the regression show that grade predicts about 62% of ELLs' scale score, when grade was entered first in the model. When grade was controlled as the covariate, the length of time seems more meaningful, particularly because it is statistically significant. Length of time in the program predicts additional .6% of

Table 8

*Overall Scale Scores of Students With Disabilities With and Without  
Use of Accommodations*

	Mean		Standard Deviation		N
	With	Without	With	Without	
<b>Modified test directions:</b>					
Learning disability	353.81	361.44	25.59	31.10	4,638
Emotional disturbance	356.90	364.17	25.75	32.23	223
Speech language impairment	345.04	353.83	25.74	26.44	953
Other health impairment	359.00	358.93	24.11	30.51	550
<b>Modified timing/scheduling:</b>					
Learning disability	349.30	361.55	27.84	30.91	4,638
Emotional disturbance	353.96	364.46	25.29	32.09	223
Speech language impairment	342.50	353.85	26.63	26.40	953
Other health impairment	354.31	359.26	25.48	30.21	550
<b>Other approved accommodation:</b>					
Learning disability	350.60	361.20	28.37	30.89	4,638
Emotional disturbance	374.33	363.04	14.50	31.64	223
Speech language impairment	331.64	353.88	12.50	26.47	953
Other health impairment	357.76	358.98	25.15	30.09	550

Table 8 - continued

	Mean		Standard Deviation		N
	With	Without	With	Without	
<b>Modified presentation format:</b>					
Learning disability	347.297	361.47	23.31	30.99	4,638
Emotional disturbance	344.66	364.52	20.28	31.75	223
Speech language impairment	338.42	353.84	24.48	26.41	953
Other health impairment	355.53	359.12	23.88	30.23	550

Table 9

*Univariate Analysis of Variance for Accommodation Type and Disability Status (Dependent Variable: Composite Scale Score)*

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> *
Modified test directions X	3	.913	.434
Disability status			
Modified timing/scheduling X	3	0.558	.643
Disability status			
Other approved accommodation X	3	1.558	.198
Disability status			
Modified presentation format X	3	1.204	.307
Disability status			

ELLs' scale score when grade was controlled as the covariate. This percentage is small and shows a mild relationship, but still statistically significant ( $P < .001$ ) (see Table 10).

Table 10

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables*

*Predicting Overall Scale Score on ACCESS Test*

Variable	t	B	R <sup>2</sup>	p*
<b>Step 1:</b>				
Grade	86.457	.786	.617	.000
<b>Step 2:</b>				
Length of time in program	8.524	.089	.006	.000

The researcher also ran the model in a different order by entering length of time in the program as the first step and grade as the second step. Results showed that grade was still the strongest predictor ( $t = 174.7$ ;  $P < .001$ ), followed by length of time in the program ( $t = 47$ ;  $P < .001$ ). The less value of the R Square Change for grade when it was entered as the second step could be interpreted by the correlation between length of time in the program and grade ( $r = .166$ ,  $P < .001$ ). There could be other variables that might also predict students' scores, such as their native language, socioeconomic status, or type of program; however, only data regarding grade and length of time could be reported for this study based on available data.



## **Qualitative Results**

**Factors related to achievement for ELP assessment.** Interview responses related to this question include four different comments. The other respondents referred back to the question regarding potential relationships between disability and accommodation and reiterated that it would help students' achievement on the assessment. Of the four comments regarding this question, one interviewee said:

I guess it is sort of like leveling the playing field, but as I mentioned before, so many of the accommodations they would normally get on a statewide assessment (Braille, read-aloud on the reading, unlimited time) are not permitted on the ELP assessment because they are trying to get a measure of English learning and I think there is a real tension in trying to make sure that you are accounting for the disability and still getting the measure of ELP.

Another interviewee focused specifically on deaf ELLs and noted that it would be challenging to get a valid measure of the listening, speaking, and possible writing skills due to the nature of the accommodation. One interviewee discussed the issue of a student's level and extra time on the assessment. The interviewee's argument was that if a student's ELP level is a 1 or 2 and the student has a disability, extra time is helpful because of the time needed for processing the language. The final comment was regarding the helpfulness of small group or one-on-one testing environments because it takes out the distractions. She particularly noted that this was important for autistic students to be more successful.

**Familiarity and emotional factors.** During the interviews, educators discussed five other factors that contribute to achievement on the assessment. These five other factors are not

easily measured and not included in the demographic information coded for the assessment.

First, students' familiarity with using the accommodation year round was mentioned by 4 of the 8 interviewees. Motivation level of the student was discussed by two of the interviewees.

Frustration level of the student, fear, and family pressure (possibly related to culture of the family) were each mentioned by one of the interviewees. These factors are obviously important considerations, but not ones that are captured or measured with this assessment or through other means currently in use in school districts.

I think for a few [students] it is kind of that there is a lot of family pressure on doing well for certain cultures. Like I had one little Lebanese boy who came in and said, 'I got a B+, it was awful,' and I said, 'Oh, that is a good grade,' and he said, 'No, you don't understand, it is a Lebanese thing, I have to get A's.' I went, 'I do understand, a B+ is a good grade.' I know that for some cultures there is a lot of family pressure to excel and to do amazing things and for those children sometimes I think there is fear. We try to diffuse that by talking about it ahead of time, by saying, 'You are ready for it, it is going to be easy, you are going to do well. It just tells us what class to put you in, that is all it does, so just don't sweat it.'

#### **Research Question 4**

*What are perceptions that exist on accommodations on annual ELP assessments for the specific population of ELLs with disabilities among state, district, and classroom level educational professionals?*

Research Question 4 regarding perceptions about accommodations on the annual ELP assessment for ELLs with disabilities is addressed solely using qualitative interview data. These

results show the richness of the data collected from the interviews and provide further explanations on several key issues.

### **Challenges With Assessing ELLs with Disabilities**

**Specific disabilities.** The first perception that was mentioned in six of the interviews is the specific disabilities that make assessment accommodations challenging. Two state-level and one local-level educators discussed the challenges with students who are blind. The same three educators and an additional local-level special education educator also emphasized the challenges with deaf students who need to use sign language and how to assess ELP for those students. Those four educators also discussed the challenges for assessing the ELP of ELLs with significant cognitive disabilities. Additional concerns were addressed (by only one educator each) regarding ELLs with dyslexia because “any reading disability is certainly confounded and compounded by the presence of English as not the primary language.” One of the other concerns included emotionally disturbed students because the educator believed that inconsistencies in their behavior made assessment in general challenging. The final comment by a local-level ESL administrator was, “I had an interesting case this year where a child was diagnosed as a selective mute, so it is next to impossible to assess ability in speaking.”

### **Test Administration**

**Fidelity to administration guidelines.** Two additional questions in the interviews incorporated both the usefulness of accommodations as well as the actual use of accommodations. In terms of the usefulness of accommodations one local-level elementary teacher commented that modified timing, small group settings, and modified directions are very useful for her ELLs with autism. Other comments focused on training and administration. Both

the state-level educator who oversees assessment and the local-level ESL administrator discussed that much training is done with school divisions on using accommodations on the SOL assessments, but less is done on ACCESS for ELLs because it is not a state-developed test. The local-level assessment administrator commented that she had concerns about fidelity to test administration guidelines and administration of the assessment with accommodations and fidelity to the accommodations guide for the ACCESS for ELLs.

**Actual use of provided accommodations.** Responses about students' actual use of the accommodations provided appeared to be similar comments that would be made regarding any assessment. First, both a local-level assessment administrator and a local-level special education administrator shared that similar to the SOL assessments, if a student feels like the accommodation makes him/her look different, they will not want to use the accommodation provided. This is especially the case for older students. Testing in small groups with students with similar accommodations was a suggestion for this issue. Both the local-level assessment administrator and the local-level ESL administrator agreed that students have to use the accommodation throughout the year and feel comfortable with it to actually use it during the test.

### **Recommendations for Federal Requirements of Annual ELP Assessment**

**Progress and eligibility.** The final question in each of the interviews: With reauthorization of ESEA (NCLB) approaching, what suggestions do you have to change/improve how the federal requirement of annual ELP assessment of ELLs with disabilities is handled? elicited a wide range of responses. Three respondents acknowledged that guidance is needed for how to better instruct and assess "lifers" (ELLs with disabilities that plateau and struggle to move beyond a given proficiency level. One of the respondents noted that adding

accommodations is not always the answer. Regarding special education, one state-level and one local-level administrator presented concerns for ELLs who are not eligible for special education, but who need additional services. Both respondents noted that there is potential for the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) for this group of ELLs.

**Considerations for considering students' disabilities before language needs.** For ELLs who are also identified with a disability, four of the administrator respondents expressed that attention to the disability and instruction and assessment of a child with a disability should come before addressing the language needs of the child, or at least more focus should be placed on the disability and then on their English language learning. The local-level special education administrator went on to comment that the IEP team should work together to determine the primary disability. One idea presented by the state-level assessment administrator was that English language learning becomes a part of the IEP for those students rather than serving the students separately under ESL services. One of the classroom-level respondents spoke adamantly about the appropriateness of the assessment. She said:

It is unfair to give a child an assessment that is not appropriate for him or her or that he or she can't do. It is very upsetting to have to test those children because the expectation, for me, if you give a child an assessment, the understood expectation should be that that child has some way of passing that assessment, that you are assessing something and we are testing a child who has a severe disability, that we know is never going to be able to do this and they look at you with this look in their eyes like, 'should I be able to do this?' because, of course, you should be giving them a test they can't do. It is very upsetting.

One state-level special education respondent recommended that assessment requirements

consider first and foremost how to assess to students' strengths. A classroom-level respondent said, "This is not a one-size-fits-all approach" and recommended that assessments be authentic or performance-based.

**Accessibility of ELP assessment.** Overwhelmingly, six respondents said that there is a great need for further consideration and guidance on how to assess ELLs who are blind, deaf, or who have significant cognitive disabilities. Current requirements do not address these students at all and because the nature of their disability precludes them from taking some or all parts of the assessments, the current mode of assessment is not accessible to these students. This has an impact on the student and his/her success as well as on local and state funding because of these students' non-scores for parts or all of the assessment. Particularly for blind ELLs, one respondent said:

This is a huge compliance issue because you are not providing equal access to the test to those students. The thing is they are probably going to read using Braille for the rest of their lives and with the SOL assessments that is sort of the rule of thumb we use, if it is the way you are going to access print for the rest of your life, then even though it is different from reading, it is your version of reading. You are never going to get a measure of their proficiency in reading because for them English is reading Braille.

One state-level administrator said:

I think particularly for the deaf and blind there needs to be some recognition that you're not going to get a full measure of their proficiency and that it might be appropriate for those students to have only two of the domains instead of all four.

Another local-level special education administrator noted that the communication choice by the family must also be respected, including in assessments.

**Collaboration and technical assistance.** There were several other valuable holistic comments which were provided by respondents. First the state-level special education administrator suggested that, “Federal departments involving special education and English language acquisition need to work together and communicate on assessment requirements and identification requirements and offer more flexibility to schools.” Both the state-ESL administrator and the local-level assessment administrator agreed that there is a need for technical assistance to make sure all teachers understand the accommodations for the ACCESS and that there is assistance on deciding and making sure there is a good fit of the accommodation for the student. Finally, both classroom-level respondents advised that more stock should be put into practitioner professional judgment for instruction and assessment.

At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked if there was any additional information he/she would like to provide. Interestingly, one state-level administrator said, “It is surprising to think that we have almost 7,000 ELLs with disabilities.” Finally, to the credit of the researcher, four of the respondents commented that further research is needed on ELLs with disabilities.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many factors to consider regarding the ELP assessment of ELLs with disabilities. A comprehensive review of the literature shows the importance of accommodations for ELL students as well as the need for research on the use of accommodations for ELLs, especially ELLs with disabilities (Abedi et al., 2004; Albus & Thurlow, 2008; Barrera, 2008; Kopriva et al., 2007). Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), the researcher constructed a conceptual framework to incorporate the context, content, and focus of the study. Contextually, the study included administrators at the state and district levels (policy creators) and teachers (implementers) at the classroom level. The content of the study centered on the participation of ELLs with disabilities on statewide ELP assessments. The focus of the study included accommodation types and disability status codes for the ELP assessment. The cyclical nature of education policy is reflected in the design of the study. Further reflected in the cyclical nature of the design is the underlying theoretical framework of education as a sociocultural system. Within the system, policy has an impact on the state, district, and classroom; each of those contexts affects policy in return. Combining the theoretical foundation and related literature with the conceptual framework, along with the results to the research questions (both quantitative and qualitative), provides a coherent picture of the impact of the topic of this type of research.



The federal mandate of English language proficiency (ELP) testing for all English language learners (ELLs) has created some unique circumstances for ELLs with disabilities. Many times ELLs with disabilities are provided with accommodations for the ELP assessment. Research is limited regarding the specific accommodations that are provided to students with certain disabilities. There is little evidence to inform the field about which accommodations best suit children with certain types of disabilities and whether a specific accommodation levels the playing field for students to be successful on the assessment. Moreover, there is little known about how to tease out disability from language learning through research or through evidence-based practitioner input. This research serves as an exploratory study to examine some of these issues. Specifically, this study investigated the following four questions:

1. What accommodations are used for ELLs with disabilities in statewide ELP assessments?
2. Is there a relationship between the disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
3. Is there a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievement on ELP tests? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?
4. What are perceptions that exist on accommodations on annual ELP assessments for the specific population of ELLs with disabilities among state, district, and classroom level educational professionals?

These four research questions were investigated using both quantitative ELP assessment

(ACCESS for ELLs) data from the 2009-2010 school year from the state of Virginia, and qualitative interview data from state-level and district-level administrators and classroom teachers. Before the findings are interpreted in this chapter, two topics are worthy of discussion providing important information to consider along with other interpretations of results below.

The first topic is the demographic information included in the quantitative data provided by the Virginia Department of Education. There are almost 7,000 ELLs in Virginia public schools coded with a disability status. The most common disability was Learning Disability and the second most common was Speech/Language. Given the nature of language learning it is important to recognize the similarities that exist between the signs of a learning disability and the signs of language learning as well as the commonalities that exist between Speech/Language and language learning. These fine lines and the generally novice ability for professionals to tease out the differences signal that there could be questions regarding a student's classification of ELL versus learning disabled or ELL versus a speech language disability. Also given that the number of students classified as such is higher than any other disability, it is reasonable to question the appropriate classification of these students as well as to bear in mind the similarities between language learning and both of these disabilities. Results from this study have implications regarding the identification process of ELLs with disabilities. An important duty of educators is to provide appropriate services and, if needed, accommodations to students. Another consideration is cultural sensitivity of the identification process and the students' cultural background in conjunction with certain accommodations. There are clear benefits at the student, district, state, and federal level to ensure that students are accurately identified.

The second topic before discussing the interpretation of the findings is the familiarity of educators with ELLs and students with disabilities and requirements for these students according to ELL-focused educators versus special education-focused educators. Based on evidence from all of the interviews of administrators and teachers of ELLs, those professionals were more knowledgeable about special education requirements, the IEP and accommodations for specific special needs. Oppositely, evidence from the three interviews with special education professionals suggested less familiarity with ELLs and the federal requirements, assessments, and accommodations for them by special education professionals. Although all interviews provided rich data, it is important for the researcher to recognize these two issues.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from this study will be interpreted by question:

1. What accommodations are used for ELLs with disabilities in statewide ELP assessments?

Among the 11 total accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities, 4 of them are the most frequently provided. These four types of accommodations include Modified Test Directions (445), Modified Timing (367), Other Approved Accommodation (333), and Modified Presentation Format (220). The frequency of all accommodations provided ranged from 1 to 445. Of the 15 disability status codes that were represented, the four most common disability codes were Learning Disability (4,638), Speech/Language Impairment (953), Other Health Impairment (550), and Emotional Disturbance (223). The frequency of all disability status codes ranged from 1 to 4,638.

Although the number of students who were coded as deaf, blind, or those with significant cognitive disability was too small to be entered for data analysis, it was noted in the qualitative data that some educators felt that current requirements for ELP assessment are not appropriate for students who are blind, deaf, or those with significant cognitive disability. Data show that accommodations for students with these disabilities are not provided frequently. Perhaps districts may not be equipped with the necessary resources to provide these accommodations or, as is the case of Braille, the test producer is no longer allowing Braille to be used.

An important aspect that can be highlighted from the qualitative data is the level of knowledge of special education teachers about ELLs and conversely the level of knowledge of ELL teachers about students with special needs. ELL educators seemed to have a much greater understanding of disabilities and testing requirements for students with disabilities yet special education educators overall were not as familiar with instructional strategies and testing requirements for ELLs. This could be explained by the sentiment provided in the interviews by the majority of educators that the disability comes before language learning. If that is the case, then that puts special education as the primary concern of educators and then language learning as secondary.

2. Is there a relationship between the disability category and the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?

There were some accommodations that had obvious relationships to specific disabilities, for example, vision aides for students with a visual impairment, amplification for students with a hearing impairment, or a scribe for students with an orthopedic impairment. Consistently across all four of the most common disabilities, Modified Test Directions was provided the most

frequently (N = 445 from quantitative data/N=4 from qualitative data). The other most frequently provided accommodations were Modified Timing (N = 367 from quantitative data/N = 4 from qualitative data), Modified Presentation (N = 333 from quantitative data/N = 2 from qualitative data), and Other Approved Accommodation (N = 220 from quantitative data/N = 2 from qualitative data), respectively. Based on interview data, these four accommodations seem to be the accommodations which are applicable to several different disabilities, particularly those with the highest frequencies. Moreover, this finding supports previous research on commonly provided accommodations according to states' website information about this topic (Albus & Thurlow, 2008). These results are also consistent with the investigation of policy information for ELLs' on content area assessments, Modified Test Directions, Modified Timing/Scheduling, and Modified Presentation (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004). The literature references data of commonly used accommodations and policy recommendations, but because the corpus of literature is extremely limited on this topic, there may additional explanations for these four common accommodations for ELLs with disabilities. Based on policy and the interview data collected, the IEP specifies which accommodations ELLs with disabilities use. It is logical then to focus on why certain accommodations are being specified on the IEP for ELLs with disabilities. Initial research has told us that sometimes the differences between the disability-related needs and language-learning needs are confounded by the interaction between the two, making it all the more confusing for policy makers and practitioners (Barrera, 2008). Educators are likely to struggle to make research-based decisions on which accommodations to provide to ELLs with disabilities because of the extremely limited research on the topic. Interview data alluded to the idea that there may also be potential for practitioners to assign commonly provided accommodations that are easy to

administer, assuming that it cannot hurt to do so. Even though the Other Approved Accommodation was not statistically significant through the quantitative data, two interviewees each said food and verbal praise were effective accommodations for students who are emotionally disturbed and students with cognitive disabilities. These data relate to a clear connection between praise and rewards for students who are emotionally disturbed for positive reinforcement of good behavior. Perhaps practitioner experience and expertise is another avenue for future research on accommodations.

3. Is there a relationship between the accommodations provided to ELLs with disabilities and their achievements on ELP assessments? If so, what are the factors contributing to the relationship?

When related to test scores, students with disabilities who were provided accommodations presented surprising results. Overall, variance in students' scores could not be explained by their use of accommodations ( $p > .05$ ). Data showed that students with disabilities who were not provided with accommodations actually performed better on the ELP assessment ( $M=360.21$ ,  $SD=30.431$ ) compared to those who were provided with the accommodations ( $M=347.64$ ,  $SD=23.429$ ). This finding may seem to conflict with previous research on accommodations (Kopriva, et al., 2007); however, additional information from the interview data may help explain this result. Educators who were interviewed said that the test was timed, which is unlike the SOL assessments. This means that students are unaccustomed to being timed during an assessment. Secondly, several educators cautioned that students need to be using the accommodation throughout the school year in preparation for the assessment. The lack of familiarity with the timed assessment or limited familiarity with using an accommodation may

have also resulted in lower scores on the assessment. Thirdly, there could be a difference of achievement performance at the baseline point between students with disabilities who were provided accommodations and those who were not provided accommodations. However, because this study did not have baseline data of all ELL students, this interpretation is inconclusive. Also, there was no way to verify their IEP accommodation status in comparison to what was provided for the assessment.

Findings from the hierarchical regression using grade and length of time in program did prove to be significant ( $p < .001$ ), suggesting that grade and length of time in the program were significant predictors of ELP assessment scores for ELLs with learning disabilities. When grade was entered in the first step as an independent variable in the regression model, it was statistically significant ( $t = 86.457, p < .001$ ). This finding indicates that grade was a strong predictor of the score on the ELP assessment for ELLs with learning disabilities. This evidence suggests that the higher the grade of the student, the longer the amount of time the student has been receiving services, in most cases. Therefore, the higher the student's grade, the better score the student achieved. When length of time was entered in the second step as an independent variable in the regression model, it also showed statistically significant ( $t = 8.524, p < .001$ ). This finding indicates that length of time in the program was also a predictor of the score on the ELP assessment for ELLs with learning disabilities. This finding directly relates to the previous finding regarding grade. The finding suggests that the longer the student is in the program and spends longer amounts of time receiving services, the more likely the student will achieve on the assessment. Perhaps a positive implication of this finding is that English language instruction

programs have a positive effect on ELLs' performance which may suggest good quality English instruction program for ELLs.

4. What are perceptions that exist on accommodations on annual ELP assessments for the specific population of ELLs with disabilities among state, district, and classroom level educational professionals?

Finally, findings regarding educators' perceptions about assessment of ELLs with disabilities can be organized into five major themes. First, educators seemed to agree that specific disabilities make ELP assessment challenging. Students who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, students who are blind or have a visual impairment, and students with significant cognitive disabilities are particularly challenging to assess. The disability and/or the use of accommodations are very challenging to tease out of the constructs of assessment for each domain. Considering all of the skills involved for each domain (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), interpreting test results and discriminating between effects of the disability and use of an accommodation(s) is very challenging (Barrera, 2008). In other cases, a disability can negate the student's access to the assessment completely based on the domain. For example, a student who is deaf and is required to take the listening part of the assessment cannot access a portion of the assessment.

Educators acknowledged the need for more training for ELP accommodations. Test administrators need to understand how to administer the assessment for ELLs with disabilities and know how to provide specific accommodations. Educators recognized that they had limited knowledge of accommodations for ELP assessment and further, that there should be stronger fidelity to the test administration guide for accommodations. The WIDA Consortium, the



organization which developed the assessment notes in their manual that fidelity to the administration guide includes participation in the online and district training; appropriate setting for language testing (particularly for assessment of listening and speaking domains); appropriate materials in preparation for administering the assessment; fidelity to timing guidelines; accurate and complete coding of testing materials; adherence to test irregularity protocol; appropriate provisions of accommodations and administration of accommodations for ELLs with disabilities; and, most importantly, compliance with the code of ethics for the assessment.

Another common sentiment across educators was the need for students receiving accommodations on the test to use them year round so that they are comfortable using the assessment on a high stakes assessment. This is particularly important for students receiving the modified timing scheduling accommodation. The statewide achievement tests are untimed, therefore students who are provided this accommodation must understand that the ELP assessment is timed and that even with extended time, they need to move from question to question in a speedy fashion.

The concept of “lifers” (ELLs with disabilities who plateau and struggle to move beyond a given proficiency level) was another widespread topic. Due to the nature of their disability, some ELLs stay at the same proficiency level and cannot seem to move beyond one proficiency level to get to another. For these students, educators request more guidance for how to best instruct and/or assess the student for him or her to move beyond the current proficiency level. Guidance could also come from collaboration between teachers of ELLs and special education teachers on developing and implementing curriculum-based assessment to monitor students’ progress in order to provide focused instruction to enhance specific skills for students to move

beyond the plateau. This type of collaboration could and should also involve the classroom teacher to provide a multi-faceted approach with common instructional goals.

Lastly, there was a general consensus (except for one of the interviewees) that a student's disability is the student's primary label and then the limited English proficiency is secondary to the disability. In this way, considerations for instruction and assessment regarding the disability come first and then the language learning perspective is secondary. Once the primary disability and accommodations are determined, ELL specialists and teachers can consider the students' language learning needs and what accommodations might work well and/or overlap with the student's IEP. According to interview data it is customary to include a teacher with expertise in teaching ELLs when creating the IEP goals and objectives. This teacher can provide guidance on incorporating language goals and objectives into the IEP based on ELP assessment data. The ACCESS ELP assessment package includes benchmark assessments to monitor progress and school divisions also have their own locally developed tools for monitoring progress. While monitoring the development of ELP for an ELL with a disability, the special education teacher, teacher of ELLs and the classroom teacher can and should work together toward goals and objectives specified in the IEP which address language proficiency. In the past, the ESL teacher worked only on language proficiency and the special education teacher worked on goals related to the student's disability and the classroom teacher focused on grade level curriculum. This type of collaborative teaching as well as interpretation and use of data to guide instruction is a way for instruction of an ELL with a disability to be tied together and not in silos. Practitioners should continue to look for ways to extend collaboration with other teachers to provide well-rounded instruction that focuses on the goals of the IEP. Due to this new approach to

collaborating, future research can focus on the effects of this type of data driven collaboration and best practice for teachers.

### **Limitations**

This study provided both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the ELP assessment of ELLs with disabilities. Although the researcher followed the methodology explained in Chapter 3, there are some limitations to the study that must be underscored. First, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of this study was exploratory and that there was no intervention or baseline data. Therefore, any finding needs to be interpreted with caution. The quantitative data were limited to just one state and the qualitative data were limited to the same state and one school district. Quantitative data were extant test data provided by the VDOE; therefore, the data were subject to test bias and identification of test takers both as ELLs as well as students with disabilities. In addition, it is important to note that the quantitative extant data provided by the VDOE had missing data from the data set. The majority of the missing data were optional variables/codes that were not completed by the test administrator/student (depending on the age of the student). Due to missing extant data, it was challenging to determine if extraneous variables had affected the relationship between accommodation and disability status. Also, the scope of the study was limited to 8 interviewees (3 state administrators, 3 school administrators, and 2 teachers). Incorporating more teachers and administrators could have added a broader scope of responses and decreased response bias. Test administration and fidelity to test administration guidelines are limitations to the study; the state and district provide training and monitoring and is out of the control of the researcher. Another limitation of the quantitative data are that although accommodations are provided to students, there is no tracking process

established to check the students' actual use of a provided accommodation. Also, there was no way to verify accommodation status on students' IEPs.

### **Considerations for Future Research**

This study draws attention to several considerations for future research. Overall, interviewees overwhelmingly acknowledged the need for more research. Through limitations discussed in this chapter and the exploratory nature of the research, this study helped to identify variables or factors that will allow for future research with a more rigid design. Future research should also include data from pretest and posttest scores on the ELP assessment to determine and compare students' previous ELP levels. Pretest and posttest scores could then include comprehensive analysis of between group comparison as well as within group analysis. In addition, another opportunity for future research involves the use of accommodations on the assessment. When accommodations are provided on the ELP assessment, there is no way to track the student's actual use of the accommodation. Specifically, there is no way to track if the student used the accommodation that was provided and, if so, how the student used the accommodation, for how long, or to what degree the accommodation was used. In the majority of interviews for this study, interviewees noted that students' familiarity with the accommodation and their comfort level using the accommodation in front of their peers are both important considerations. So far, only one state (Oregon) has the capability to track accommodation use on their ELP assessment because they are the only state to provide an online ELP assessment.

Through the qualitative data, there also seems to be a call for further professional development for teachers and administrators regarding ELLs with disabilities. Future research

and collaboration should include investigation of collaboration models, successful professional development, and examples of coordination and overlap between assessment, special education, and English language learner education.

Finally, further research is desperately needed both at the district level and for policy makers to ensure the appropriateness of particular testing practices and specific accommodations for students with specific disabilities. It is critical that the construct of the test is not confounded by the student's disability. Research regarding the most appropriate assessment and instruction practices for ELLs who are also deaf, blind, or who have significant cognitive disabilities is needed. Research related to appropriate assessment and accommodations for students who are deaf, blind, or who have significant cognitive disabilities will have effects at the student, classroom, district, state, and federal level. Results of this study highlight the importance of solving a very complicated conundrum for students with these specific disabilities.

As mentioned, the population of ELLs with disabilities is small, but the effects of testing the ELP of these students span from the student level to federal funding and policy. The researcher's intent was to bring to light through qualitative and quantitative data the current practices in place for assessing the ELP of ELLs with disabilities. The results of this study show that wheels are in motion to assess these students, but further research is needed to test them appropriately. Like any other student, it is their right to have access to a required assessment and to be given the opportunity to show what they know and can do.

The major findings in this study can be summarized to 10 important points (see Table 11 for summary). First, it is critical to recognize that from the Virginia data alone, there were almost 7,000 ELLs with disabilities within the ELL population. That number of 7,000 represents

Table 11

*Implications of Research Study*

	Practitioner	Administrator	Policy maker
Awareness of population of ELLs with disabilities.	Appreciate and serve the needs of this population through instruction and assessment.	Appreciate and serve the needs of this population and oversee/fulfill requirements for this population.	Appreciate and serve the needs of this population through appropriate and considerate policy.
Appropriate identification of ELLs with disabilities.	Identify ELLs with disabilities appropriately by administering assessments following assessment protocol and guidelines.	Select appropriate, research-based assessments for identification of ELLs and for specific disabilities and be cognizant of mis- and over-identification.	Create policies that can be adapted, applicable, and realistic for a student who is an ELL and/or a student's eligibility special education.
Increased understanding for special educators of requirements and instruction of ELLs.	Obtain a comprehensive understanding of requirements and assessment and instruction of ELLs.	Obtain a comprehensive understanding of requirements and assessment and instruction of ELLs.	Obtain a comprehensive understanding of requirements and assessment and instruction of ELLs.
Disability as primary label, aspects of language learning and assessment of ELLs with disabilities.	Apply understanding of language acquisition and language learning strategies to IEP goals and assessment requirements.	For program structure and instruction and assessment structure, consider disability as the primary label for ELLs with disabilities and then consider language learning goals and assessment plans for the IEP.	For creation of and revisions to policy, particularly reauthorization of ESEA, consider disability as the primary and then aspects of language learning in coordination with instruction and assessment plans for language learning based on the disability.

Table 11 - continued

	Practitioner	Administrator	Policy maker
Increased collaboration between special educators, educators of ELLs, and assessment professionals.	On a per student basis instructional teams, including the content area/classroom teacher, teacher of English language, and special educators should work together on collaboration team and possibly teach collaboratively.	Provide professional development opportunities for educators of ELLs and special educators as well as provide time for the content area/classroom teacher, teacher of English language, and the special educator to plan collaboratively.	Create requirements and/or guidelines for an increased level of professional development and collaboration between content area/classroom teachers, teachers of English language, and special educators.
Evidence for matching disabilities to specific accommodations.	Participate in and/or conduct research to investigate the provisions/use of specific accommodations for disability status codes.	Allow/request the participation of practitioners to investigate the provisions/use of specific accommodations for disability status codes.	Approve and fund research to investigate the provisions/use of specific accommodations for disability status codes.
Tracking of actual use of accommodations.	Track students' actual use of accommodations.	Create systems that allow tracking of students' actual use of accommodations and/or allow/request test administrators to track actual use of accommodations.	Assist states and districts in the creation of systems to track students' actual use of accommodations and fund research involving actual use of accommodations.
Increased use of and practice with accommodations in preparation for ELP assessment.	Embed practice with accommodations in instruction throughout the school year.	Require teachers to embed practice with test accommodations to increase students' familiarity with accommodations.	Provide guidance to states and districts for increasing students' familiarity with accommodations.

Table 11 - continued

	Practitioner	Administrator	Policy maker
Length of service related to achievement on the ELP assessment.	Provide ongoing support to ELLs with disabilities that addresses both the disability and language learning needs.	Create/revise program structure to encourage continued support for ELLs with disabilities.	Create/revise policy (particularly for reauthorization of ESEA) that is considerate of the length of time required for language acquisition and consider increased service/ length of time of service for ELLs with disabilities.
Access to specific domains of the assessment for students who are deaf, blind, and significantly cognitively impaired.	Increase sensitivity during instruction and assessment for students with disabilities for which certain constructs of language learning are negated due to disability.	Advocate for access to assessments (or domains of assessments) and/or policy that is sensitive to ELLs who are deaf, blind, or have significant cognitive disabilities.	Create/revise ELP assessment policy (specifically reauthorization of ESEA) that is sensitive to ELLs who are deaf, blind, or have significant cognitive disabilities.



7,000 real children who are included in two different subgroups and whose test scores contribute to AYP and school division funding. This specific group of students has intricate instructional and assessment needs by being both language learners and students with disabilities. It is critical that we pay attention to this population and the instruction, assessment, and policy for this group of students.

The second major finding is that quantitative data showed that the two most common disability status codes were Learning Disabled and Speech/Language Impairment. These codes are closely related to language learning and share many of the same commonalities in student characteristics. This raises concern for appropriate identification between language learning and disability, which has been identified a major issue in the fields of special education and English as second language instruction. Future research needs to include careful examination of the assessment tools used for identification for both ELLs and for Learning Disabled and Speech/Language Impairment. Educators need to be able to discriminate between language learning and disabilities and to be aware of when there is overlap between the two.

Two related major findings relate to the knowledge and skills of educators. First, qualitative data from the interviews supported the notion that educators with an ELL background have a comprehensive understanding of policies and best practices related to special education, but those in special education have less of an understanding of policies and best practices related to ELLs. If educators are to provide appropriate instruction through collaborative efforts across content areas and expertise, educators need to have a clear understanding of related policies and practices related to special education and ELLs. Moreover, qualitative interview data provided evidence that a child's disability be the primary label and then language learning needs should be incorporated into the IEP and instructional goals and assessment practices should be considered

with language learning needs in mind. To do this, collaboration between special educators and teachers of ELLs must occur which implies that preservice teacher preparation and professional development for current educators must incorporate collaboration across disciplines.

Fifth, data from this study showed that educators are able to relate obvious connections between specific disabilities paired with specific accommodations for the ELP assessment, but there continues to be a lack of evidence for educators to draw from to support which specific accommodations are a good match for which specific disabilities on a language proficiency assessment. Furthermore, once accommodations are recommended, evidence from this study also supported the notion that test administrators need additional training on how to administer the test correctly with accommodations. An additional finding that is tied to these issues is students' actual use of provided accommodations. That is to say that even if the appropriate accommodations are selected and provided to the student and the test is administered appropriately with the selected accommodations, students must be familiar, comfortable, and willing to use them. Future research should include further investigation of accommodations in terms of tracking actual use of the accommodations by students. These findings have weighty implications regarding student performance on the assessment which is also tied to funding for school divisions and states.

There were two major findings related to students' scores that should also be highlighted in this summary. First, quantitative evidence illustrated that students who did not use accommodations on average scored better than those who did. Qualitative interview data suggest that the students' familiarity and level of comfort particularly in front of their peers are both potential factors related to this issue. Future research should delve deeper into comparisons

between use and nonuse of accommodations on ELP assessments. Cognitive labs involving student think-alouds could be one way to get student-level data to help explain this phenomenon. Additionally, quantitative evidence also illustrated that the longer students were receiving ELL services (noted by the length of time in program variable and the loosely related grade variable), the better students scored on the assessment. Currently, policy outlines yearly improvement of students' proficiency levels and the overarching significance of this finding is that schools' Title III funds are tied to the progress ELLs make each year on their ELP. This finding has implications for the reauthorization of ESEA for reconsidering that ELLs must make yearly progress in ELP.

Finally, there was also a critical and disturbing finding evidenced in the qualitative interview data and verified by policy research in preparation for this study. A majority of interviewees explained the discrepancy between the federally-mandated ELP assessment of each of the four domains of language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and participation in the assessment for each domain by ELLs who are deaf, blind, or significantly cognitively disabled. A deaf student's participation in the listening section, a blind student's participation on a test that is not allowed to be Brailled according to the developer, or questions that carry a cognitive demand through language that are overbearing for a student who is significantly cognitively disabled: Each scenario is evidence of preventing a student's access to a test (or part of a test) in which he/she is required by law to participate. Educators who were interviewed are stumped on how to implement policy that completely infringes on constructs of the ELP assessment. The implications of this finding are directly related to specific students and their well-being during test administration and span to national reform on this issue.

Based on work related to this study, the author hopes that reauthorization will incorporate changes that will undo limitations of current policy and practice and provide new pathways for appropriate practice for instruction and assessment of ELLs with disabilities.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Protocol**

#### **Study Overview**

The research I am doing involves English language learners (ELLs) with disabilities and their participation in the federally-mandated English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessment here in Virginia, the ACCESS for ELLs. The study involves the use of quantitative data from the ACCESS for ELLs assessment from the 2009-2010 school year from Virginia as well as qualitative data from eight interviews with education professionals at the state, district, and classroom levels to obtain perspectives on the ELP assessment of the specific population of ELLs with disabilities. I am particularly interested in learning more about the accommodations used by ELLs with specific disabilities and the achievement of this specific group of students on the ELP assessment.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to add to the current literature available about the specific population of students who are ELLs with disabilities and accommodations provided to this population of students on the federally-mandated annual ELP assessment. Currently, literature regarding this subject is limited

## **Participation in the Study**

I would like to request your participation in an interview for the qualitative element of this study. I would like to ask you several open-ended questions related to the topic I described previously. The questions I will ask you have been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Commonwealth University. Your anonymity will be respected. Neither your name nor your organization's name will be identified. Only your professional role will be used (state, district, or classroom roles). All digital recordings and transcriptions will remain confidential. This interview will last 30-60 minutes. Do you agree to participate in this interview?

### **Interviewee Demographic Information**

1. Please state your professional title and the organization for which you work.
2. How long have you worked for this organization in your current professional capacity?

### **Interview Protocol Guiding Questions**

1. Tell me about your understanding of/experience with the federal mandate of annual ELP assessment of ELLs who also have disabilities.
2. What accommodations are typically provided to students with which specific disabilities? What is your perception of the usefulness of the accommodations and/or students' actual use of the accommodations?
3. The data from the ACCESS for ELLs ELP assessment shows there are potential relationships between type of disability and accommodation provided (a list will be generated to show interviewee based on the quantitative data analyzed for this study). Please comment on your perception of the relationships identified between specific disability and accommodation provided. What factors do you believe contribute to the relationships identified?

4. The data from the ACCESS for ELLs ELP assessment shows there are potential relationships between accommodation provided and achievement on the assessment (a list will be generated to show the interviewee based on the quantitative data analyzed for this study). Please comment on your perception of the relationships between the accommodations identified and achievement on the assessment. What factors do you believe contribute to the relationships identified?
5. With reauthorization approaching, what suggestions do you have to change/improve how the federal requirement of annual ELP assessment of ELLs with disabilities is handled?
6. With regard to the focus of this study and the data that I have shared with you, do you have any further comments or thoughts that you would like to share?



## VITA

Laura Marie Kuti was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and attended Warwick High School, Lititz, Pennsylvania. She entered Indiana University of Pennsylvania, in Indiana, Pennsylvania in 1995 and received her Bachelor of Science in December 1999. During the following years she was employed as a Spanish and English as a Second Language teacher at Solanco School District in Pennsylvania. In August, 2003, she entered the College of New Jersey and received her Master of Arts Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages in August 2004. She was then employed by the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Commonwealth University. In August 2007, she entered Virginia Commonwealth University to complete her Doctor of Philosophy in Education.