



Understanding the ACCESS for ELLs™ Test

This document contains an explanation of the WIDA language proficiency levels and the tiered assessment system of the ACCESS for ELLs™ field test. The latter part of this document provides background on the history of the WIDA Consortium and the field test development process.

Essential Background

ACCESS for ELLs™ stands for *Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners*. It is a large-scale test that first and foremost addresses the English language development **standards** that form the core of the WIDA Consortium’s approach to instructing and testing English language learners. These standards incorporate a set of model **performance indicators** (PIs) that describe the expectations educators have of ELL students at four different grade level clusters and in five different content areas.

The **grade level clusters** include K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. There are **five content areas** of the standards. The first is called social and instructional language (SI), which incorporates proficiencies needed to deal with the general language of the classroom and the school. The others are English language arts (LA), math (MA), science (SC), and social studies (SS).

For each grade level, then, the standards specify one or more performance indicators for each content area within each of the **four language domains**: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.

The WIDA framework recognizes the continuum of language development within the four domains with five **proficiency levels**.

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Entering	Beginning	Developing	Expanding	Bridging

These levels describe the spectrum of a learner’s progression from knowing little to no English to acquiring the English skills necessary to be successful in an English-only mainstream classroom without extra support. This final, exit stage for ELL status is designated Level 6 (formerly ELL). Level 7 is used for students who are native English speakers or who have never been designated as ELL. Within each combination of grade level, content area, and language domain, there is a PI at each of the five points on the proficiency ladder, and the sequence of these five PIs together describe a logical progression and accumulation of skills on the path to full proficiency.

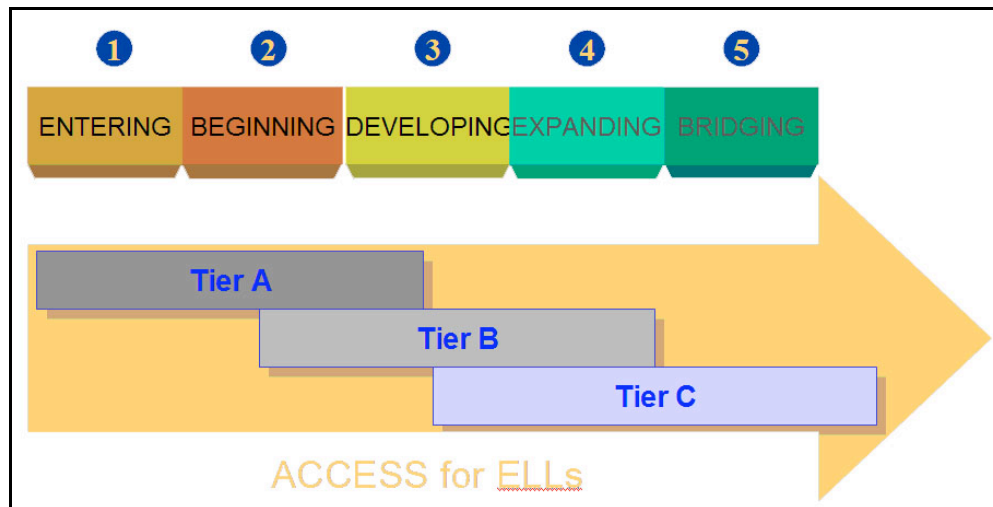
Drawn from the PIs, the ACCESS for ELLs™ incorporates all five standards and proficiency levels in sections that correspond to the four domains. The target administration times for each section of the test are:

- **Listening: 20-25 minutes, machine scored**
- **Reading: 35-40 minutes, machine scored**
- **Writing: Up to 1 hour, rater scored**
- **Speaking: Up to 15 minutes, administrator scored**

The goal of the ACCESS for ELLs™ test is to allow students to demonstrate their level of proficiency through the PIs. However, there are far too many PIs altogether to present to any single test taker. A test with questions assessing each and every PI would be far too long to fit in any reasonable testing session. For any particular child, some of the questions on a comprehensive test might be dismissively easy, making it boring, while others would be exactly hard, making it frustrating. It is important to avoid both possibilities to achieve a reliable test.

The Tiers

The solution to making the test appropriate to each individual was to present the test items in 3 **tiers** for each grade level: A, B, and C. The following chart shows how the different tiers map to the proficiency levels.



You can see from this test design that the tiers overlap, a necessity for making sure each tier is measuring to a common proficiency scale.

Each tier, of course, is only able to discriminate performance on its portion of the proficiency scale, so to make sure the whole ACCESS for ELLs™ test works as intended, it is necessary to place each student into the tier that best matches his or her proficiency level. The decision as to where the student currently falls on the scale is best made by the student’s teachers, based on the information they have about the student’s language proficiency, including

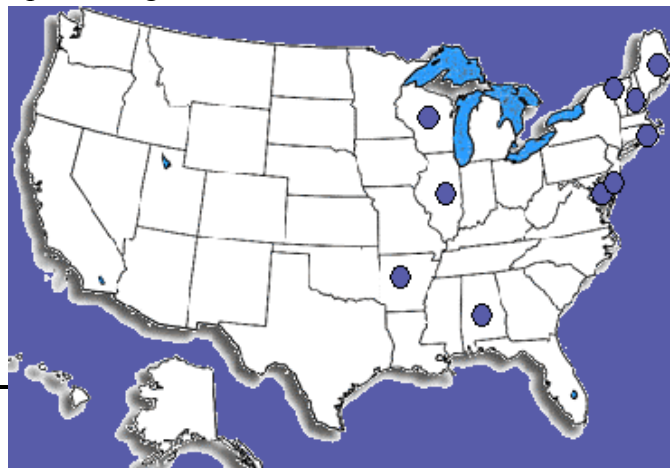
performance on other language tests. To facilitate the placement process, the WIDA consortium is developing a screener that will become part of the full test battery when the test becomes operational.

The ACCESS for ELLs™ test battery is a collection of assessment instruments administered to all ELL students across all grades and all proficiencies. Each test form consists of a set of **thematic folders**, or parts, each of which contains three to six test items. The test is arranged in this way to give students a context for the items they are presented with and to minimize the cognitive leaps they have to make in transitioning from math items to language arts items to science items, and so on.

Each test instrument takes particular aim at a certain grade level cluster and range of proficiencies, but each also has to align with all the other instruments in the battery. That is, they each measure a certain segment of a common academic English proficiency measurement scale. To do this successfully, some of the items on any single test are shared among certain other tests. They are “carried over” between grade level clusters and tiers as complete thematic folders. Each Tier A form, with the exception of the grades 1-2 form, has two thematic folders from the grade level below it. Similarly, each Tier C form contains two thematic folders from the grade level above it. For example, the grade 3-5 Tier A test shares certain items with the 1-2 Tier C and 3-5 Tier B test forms. Likewise, the 6-8 Tier C form borrows items from 6-8 Tier B and 9-12 Tier A. It might be argued that asking a child to respond to questions for which he or she has no preparation on one hand or for which he or she is overqualified makes those items unfair indicators. However, in fact, this configuration provides just the kind of confirmatory evidence needed for equating all the forms to the common measurement scale. In this way, we can better assure that as a child progresses through the grades and in English proficiency, we get an accurate picture of his or her real advances from year to year.

Origins of WIDA & Development of the Field Test

In 2002, the U.S. Department Education awarded the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction an enhancement grant to develop a K-12 English proficiency test. Under the leadership of Wisconsin DPI, three states originally formed the WIDA consortium: **Wisconsin, Delaware, and Arkansas**. Other early additions were the District of Columbia, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Illinois and Alabama joined later, for a total of ten states, representing some 270,000 ELLs.



Several organizations are partners in the WIDA project. There is the state and consortium leadership of Tim Boals and Elizabeth Cranley at the Wisconsin DPI. The Lead Developer of the WIDA standards is Margo Gottlieb of the Illinois Resource Center. Item specification development was led by Fred Davidson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The Language Testing Division at Center for Applied Linguistics is responsible for test development and coordinator/administrator trainings. CAL staff includes Dorry Kenyon, the Project Director; Jim Bauman, the Project Manager; and research assistants Jessica Motz and Ellen Parkhurst. The University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh is coordinating the technological aspects of the project including website and database development and management and is assisting with student data collection, and the trainings developed by CAL reside on UWO's Desire2Learn online facility. The professional development component of WIDA is led by Lorraine Valdez-Pierce at George Mason University while project evaluation is the responsibility of Judith Wilde of the Beta Group.

Development of the ACCESS for ELLs™ test began in the fall of 2003, following the completion of the standards. The development followed the course of first setting test item specifications and then developing preliminary items to fit these specifications. The initial item development was largely an undertaking of teachers recruited from most of the consortium states. Items were then edited and assembled into a battery of pilot tests, which were administered in Wisconsin, Illinois, and the District of Columbia.

The purpose of piloting is to establish whether and how well the test procedures work. It also serves to give the test developers an idea of how different types of items perform and whether the test, as designed, shows a good likelihood of successfully discriminating language proficiency.

Following the pilot, the development team undertook a second round of item development. Each item was reviewed for content accuracy and appropriateness, and for cultural and linguistic bias. Following this review, the final cut of items was made and test booklets constructed for field testing. At the time of this writing (December, 2004), field testing is nearing completion.

Field testing for the ACCESS for ELLs™ has four primary purposes:

1. To ensure that all test items function as intended when administered to a cross-section of students representing those to whom the assessment will later be given operationally.
2. To calibrate the test items (i.e., determine their difficulty levels) and create a single reporting scale both across the three tiers within a grade level cluster and across the grade level clusters. (To do so, there are some items in common both across tiers and grade levels.)
3. To collect performance data to relate scores on the assessment to the WIDA proficiency levels and conduct preliminary validation studies.
4. To have a “dry run” of all logistical procedures (e.g., test coordinator training, test administrator training) with a smaller number of individuals before the large-scale roll-out of the test.

Since the entire test battery of 24 test booklets must be field tested, it is necessary to select students appropriate for each of these instruments and to select them in numbers high enough to provide meaningful and reliable data on the ability of each item to discriminate reliably at its designated proficiency level. This requires that each item, and by extension each form, be administered to at least 400 students across the consortium. Since there are 24 test booklets altogether (4 grades x 3 tiers x 2 test batteries), this amounts to 9800 students.

To allocate and distribute the testing burden, each state was asked to identify a number of students proportional to its population of ELL students within the full consortium.

These students were selected and assigned to a particular test form based on the guidelines discussed earlier; that is, teacher judgment and/or the results of a screening procedure. Since the screener for the ACCESS for ELLs™ test is not in place as yet (in fact, the items that will make up the screener will be included in the field test forms), other language assessment tools currently in use in the states are being used instead. To facilitate matching students to the WIDA defined proficiency scale, “crosswalks” between the scale used on those test and the WIDA scale were provided.

Student Data Used on the Field Test

The impetus for forming the WIDA consortium and developing the ACCESS for ELLs™ test has been the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. This law requires districts to assess annually the English language proficiency gains of all English language learners (ELLs). To this end, that state educational agencies (SEAs) must establish annual measurable achievement objectives (AMAOs) for English language proficiency and report gains in a consistent manner to demonstrate that students are meeting the AMAOs. The AMAOs represent annual goals for student growth in English language proficiency. The ACCESS for ELLs™ will be the instrument used to measure and report growth in a consistent manner, and districts and schools will be held accountable for the English language development gains of their English language learners.

In addition to English language proficiency testing, ELLs are required to participate in annual academic testing for all students, the results of which must be reported on a state, district, and school basis. The data reporting has the intent of demonstrating that a school or district is making adequate yearly progress (AYP) in educating its students to meet state educational standards. In the case of ELL students, the attainment of English language proficiency to successfully take and pass the state’s mandated academic achievement tests in English is essential. ACCESS for ELLs™ will be a tool to measure ELLs readiness to take part in large-scale state assessments in English with and/or without accommodations.

The NCLB law also stipulates that AYP must be made not just in the aggregate, but also within designated subgroups of the ELL population defined by such demographic factors as race, sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability status, and language proficiency. For this reason, the analysis of the field test results needs to look at each of these factors and determine that items behave equivalently on each of them. Therefore, it is necessary to gather background data on each of the students participating in the field test. To protect the identity

of the students, however, the field test developers are not collecting or using any student's last name. Only the first name and initial of the last name are used to match a test booklet with a student. The student's unique student ID will be used to track and record student test results.

Milestones in the Field Test

Below are the landmark dates in the coordination of the field test:

Milestone	Dates
SEA Coordinators Workshop	Online 8/5
Content & Bias Reviews	Chicago, 8/16-8/20
School & Student Sampling	States, completed 9/3
LEA & Site Coordinators Workshop	Online from 9/15
Test Administrators Workshop	Online from 9/22
Distribution of Test Materials	From 9/29
Field Testing	From 10/4 – 11/12
Field Test Scoring and Analysis	January-February, 2005