



Assessing English Learners

Evaluating Learning Loss

Spring 2020



INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 has had a significant impact on educational testing as it calls for continued accountability testing in English language arts, mathematics, and science. The act also ushered in a new model for assessing English Learners (ELs): from new requirements for educating and evaluating ELs according to Title III, Part A, to new school accountability policies that meet Title I requirements. ESSA provides for the equitable instruction and assessment of ELs across the United States. State education agencies are required to submit plans describing how they intend to meet ESSA requirements to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. All states must have an approved plan, which includes the assessment of ELs, the establishment of English language proficiency (ELP) indicators, the setting of maximum timelines to proficiency, and the establishment of consistency in terms of identification and reclassification of ELs.

ESSA's most considerable impact on ELs is the requirement that states adopt policies that apply to all ELs within the state and apply those policies consistently and equitably. The passage of ESSA also provides for a means of reviewing all assessments used to assess ELs and a method for offering some guidance as to screening, identification, and reclassification of ELs. ESSA requires that all students who may be classified as ELs be assessed within 30 days of enrollment in a local education agency. As with the academic accountability portion of ESSA, all states are required to evaluate the progress of ELs in achieving the state ELP standards. States have made progress implementing ESSA's new requirements relating to ELs. All states did submit, for the very first time, their ELP indicators and assessments used to assess ELs. Results of those submissions were mixed, with many states receiving a "Partially Meets" determination.

IMPACT OF SCHOOL BREAKS

While learning loss over summer break is not a new concept, the learning loss that will likely occur as a result of the world being stricken with a virus of epic proportions will be particularly detrimental. The pandemic forced governments across the globe to restrict their citizens' movements to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. One of those measures was that schools closed early, beginning in March and April of 2020. This action resulted in both lost assessment and instructional opportunities for all students, including ELs. Most state education agencies implemented distance learning opportunities for their students, with classes carried out online. The disruption in normal educational activities is undoubtedly going to impact student learning and progress toward proficiency in academic subjects. It will most certainly affect ELs in achieving English language proficiency.

A recent survey conducted by the Collaboration for Student Success in April 2020 indicates that all students are impacted by the disruption of COVID-19 and that ELs may be more impacted due to lack of access to Wi-Fi and other enabling technology. The report indicates that possibly more than 12 million students cannot participate in online learning activities due to a lack of technology and access to Wi-Fi.

The two main points of the survey indicate that the majority of respondents (1) prefer a business as usual approach beginning with the fall of the 2020–21 academic year and that the majority of respondents are (2) in favor of a fall assessment for assessing student learning loss (or growth).

The two main points of the survey indicate that the majority of respondents (1) prefer a business as usual approach beginning with the fall of the 2020–21 academic year and that the majority of respondents are (2) in favor of a fall assessment for assessing student learning loss (or growth). The need for a fall assessment of student learning is even more critical given the loss of learning opportunities due to the early school closures and implementation of online learning activities.

More than 5,500 education professionals from all 50 states participated in the survey, with more than half the states providing 50 or more responses. Approximately 81 percent of the respondents were classroom teachers. The survey posited four options to catch up from the learning loss. The majority of respondents chose “begin the next school year with the next grade’s instruction,” which was followed closely by “begin the next school year with April 2020 concepts.”



USING ACADEMIC INDICATORS FOR ASSESSING ELP ACQUISITION

Some educators have suggested using scores from academic content assessments to replace missing ELP assessment data. The practice of replacing a score from an ELP assessment that measures all four domains of speaking, listening, reading, and writing with a score from an academic content assessment does not meet the requirements of ESSA. Furthermore, researchers have cautioned that the use of academic achievement (rather than ELP) tests to determine proficiency may result in inaccurate classifications. To use an academic assessment score, schools, districts, and states would be required to disentangle progress in ELP performance from improvement in content area achievement to help them target the instructional support required to address the needs of ELs at all levels of ELP and academic achievement. Such a task would require very sophisticated modeling and analyses to separate these two concepts.

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ASSESSING WHERE STUDENTS ARE WHEN RETURNING TO SCHOOL

It is a best practice to assess students at the beginning of instruction to determine where instruction should begin for the student. This initial assessment is a foundational principle in formative assessment and instruction. This principle applies to both academic and English language proficiency. Given the additional impact of COVID-19, students must be assessed as they return to the classroom. The extended time away from formal instruction and the fact that many students lack access to online learning opportunities only exacerbates the problem of achievement gaps and learning loss among various groups of students. This situation is very real for ELs concerning learning loss in English language proficiency.

The recent survey by the Collaboration for Student Success also found that the majority of respondents favor assessing students when they return to the classroom to evaluate the amount of learning loss that may have occurred due to the closing of schools and to acknowledge the work that parents, teachers, and students completed during the closure. A fall assessment would aid in the instruction of students and would help identify how students were impacted differently during the closures when only online learning activities were available. Here again, the impact will be more significant for ELs as they will have lost the opportunity to use their English language skills in a standard school setting and will have likely been immersed in their home language for an extended time.

USING LAS LINKS TO ASSESS STUDENT STATUS

The LAS Links assessment program is an ideal candidate for determining the proficiency level of ELs, screening new ELs, and evaluating student status against the English language proficiency standards. LAS Links is used in a variety of ways throughout U.S. schools, including summative, interim, and formative applications. LAS Links has been used to determine student growth with respect to English language proficiency standards with excellent success.

The California Department of Education is reminding districts that ELs’ “progress toward language acquisition” will need to be assessed upon their return to school to identify any “additional services and supports to account for how the distance learning program may have impacted the student’s progress toward proficiency” (New America; “What School Closures Could Mean for English Learners,” by Amaya Garcia, Elise Franchino, and Jenny Muñiz, posted March 19, 2020). Many educators have expressed concerns about the challenges of the interruption of instruction, especially for their EL students. Most educators want to be able to “hit the ground running,” with a solid understanding of what their ELs need when they return to the classroom.

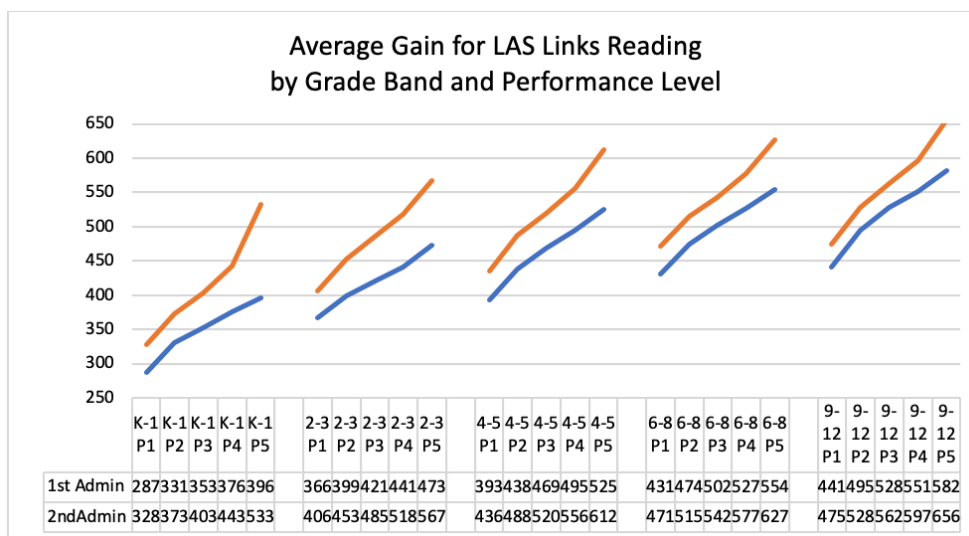
Given the genuine possibility that students will not be ready to start instruction at the expected place at the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year due to learning loss, it would be a best practice to assess where students are concerning English language proficiency upon returning to the classroom environment. LAS Links provides information that would be useful to the teacher, student, parent, and administrator in regard to the status of each EL and all ELs within the school.

LAS Links can be administered in its entirety and assesses all four domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The complete assessment yields scores and proficiency levels in the four primary domains and provides overall, comprehension, oral, literacy, and productive sub-scores. LAS Links also identifies and assesses specific academic language related to the content areas of English language arts, social studies, history, mathematics, science, and technical subjects, along with instructional and interpersonal communications, to ensure students are prepared to engage in the academic discourse that will be expected of them in today’s classrooms. LAS Links is also available in an individual subtest format for each domain (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), following the format of an English language proficiency (ELP) exam. The use of selected subtests may be beneficial to schools where the results of only a portion of an ELP summative assessment are available to the teacher and student. Using LAS Links in the fall would help fill in the missing part of the student assessment profile.

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USING LAS LINKS TO ASSESS GROWTH

As indicated earlier, LAS Links has been used in assessing the growth of EL students. The following chart was taken from the LAS Links Yearly Score Gain Analysis Report (DRC, 2018). It shows growth for reading by grade band and performance level between the beginning and end of the academic year (data from 2016-2017 academic year). The data clearly show that instruction has an impact on student language acquisition and that LAS Links is sensitive to student changes over time.



The chart shows that within each LAS Links grade band assessment (K–1, 2–3, 4–5, 6–8, and 9–12) and within the five performance levels, LAS Links is highly sensitive to changes in a student’s English language proficiency in the domain of reading. The blue line represents the average LAS Links score for grade band and performance level at the beginning of the school year while the orange line represents the average LAS Links score at the end of the academic year. The full report contains similar charts for the remaining domains of speaking, listening, and writing.

Given such instructional sensitivity, it is undoubtedly the best practice to assess student status at the beginning of an instructional year. The use of a fall assessment is even more prudent given the current situation of school closures and the use of online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Learning loss is a phenomenon that happens each time there is a long break from instruction. Typically, summer break is the most notable time of the year for learning loss to occur. A fall assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate the status of student learning and to adjust instruction to meet students where they are in terms of content mastery. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all parts of society and affected our educational system significantly. Educational agencies have responded by implementing online learning opportunities and have done a remarkable job transforming instructional practice in such a short time frame and under challenging conditions. For the student with strong support at home and reasonable access to technology and Wi-Fi, learning loss may well be minimal. However, it is posited that more than 12 million students do not have access to Wi-Fi and will most assuredly be at a disadvantage upon their return to the classroom. This disparity in access to online educational opportunities will most likely have a far greater impact on ELs in regard to learning loss. It is, therefore, necessary to assess these students' status concerning language acquisition upon their return to the classroom so that targeted instruction can be provided to help ameliorate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these students. The LAS Links program can be a key component involved in addressing this need.

A fall assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate the status of student learning and to adjust instruction to meet students where they are in terms of content mastery.

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