

National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME)
Position Statement on Testing English Learners

Testing can play an important role in the educational and career success of all learners. Non-native English speakers represent an important group of students in this regard since English continues to be the primary language of instruction and testing in the United States. The present statement pertains to *English learners* (ELs): students in K-12 and higher education settings who are learning English and are not yet proficient. ELs are also considered multilingual learners who are learning in multiple languages, engaging in communication using multiple languages, and learning and living in multicultural contexts¹.

This position statement has two related purposes: The first purpose is to ensure that those responsible for developing educational tests of knowledge, skills, and abilities for any population of students are aware of specific factors relevant to those students within the population who are ELs. The second purpose is to call attention to validity issues that need to be taken into consideration when interpreting and using the results from such tests.

Drawing from the AERA/APA/NCME Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, evidence from the research literature, and the consensus from the NCME community, special attention should be given to the following factors when designing and evaluating a test for students who are ELs:

1. Language is culturally grounded and culture is partly expressed through language. Because the language used on a test is often embedded in sociocultural contexts, care must be taken to ensure that this language will be accessible to ELs.
2. The language in which a test is given should, whenever possible, coincide with the language in which an EL is receiving instruction.
3. The degree of familiarity an EL has with a test administration mode must be taken into account. This is particularly relevant for recently arrived ELs who may have limited experience taking a test on a digital interface.
4. A critical issue when testing ELs is whether they have sufficient proficiency with the language in which a test is being given. The test results for an EL student should always be contextualized with this information.
5. Test developers should be aware that the productive and receptive language skills of ELs develop differently, and that this may interfere with their ability to engage with a test.
6. Productive and receptive language skills develop differently; test developers can improve fairness by enabling response methods that enable students to demonstrate their abilities on the target construct or domain, regardless of the balance of productive and receptive language skills

¹ For most multilingual learners in the U.S., this includes learning English; however, we acknowledge the importance of native language revitalization and instruction, language immersion, and dual language programs.

7. Testing challenges may be most pronounced for ELs with special needs or specific learning disabilities; such unique learning needs must be accommodated as appropriate and consistent with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
8. Policies and practices for testing ELs should be informed by research. In particular, there is continuing need for rigorous experimental research on the use of language supports to promote valid test score inferences in a way that does not fundamentally alter the meaning of the test construct.

We believe careful consideration of these factors will make it easier for ELs to meaningfully engage with educational tests, and will make it more likely that the results from these tests will lead to valid and fair inferences about what ELs are learning as they progress through their educational experiences.

Related Resources

Abedi, J., & Ewers, N. (2013). *Accommodations for English language learners and students with disabilities: A research-based decision algorithm*. Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (2014). [*Standards for educational and psychological testing*](#). Washington, DC: AERA.

International Test Commission. (2018). [*ITC guidelines for the large-scale assessment of linguistically and culturally diverse populations*](#).

International Test Commission. (2017). [*The ITC guidelines for translating and adapting tests*](#) (2nd ed.).

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). [*Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). [*English learners in STEM subjects: Transforming classrooms, schools, and lives*](#). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

[National Center for Educational Outcomes](#) provides numerous resources regarding testing and instructional supports and practices for English language learners, including those with disabilities.

Pitoniak, M. J., Young, J. W., Martiniello, M., King, T. C., Buteux, A., & Ginsburgh, M. (2009). [*Guidelines for the assessment of English language learners*](#). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Thurlow, M., Liu, K., Ward, J., & Christensen, L. (2013). *Assessment principles and guidelines for ELLs with disabilities*. Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Educational Outcomes, University of Minnesota.

About NCME The National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) is a professional organization for individuals involved in assessment, evaluation, testing, and other aspects of educational measurement. Members are involved in the construction and use of standardized tests; new forms of assessment, including performance-based assessment; program design; and program evaluation. NCME members include university faculty; test developers; state and federal testing and research directors; professional evaluators; testing specialists in business, industry, education, community programs, and other professions; licensure, certification, and credentialing professionals; graduate students from educational, psychological, and other measurement programs; and others involved in testing issues and practices.

Approved by the NCME Executive Committee, September 2020.