



# Classroom Perspectives on English Learners with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

ALTELLA Report

September 2018

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Laurene L. Christensen and James D. Mitchell



**Wisconsin Center for  
Education Research**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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The Alternate English Language Learning Assessment (ALTELLA) project researches instructional practices, accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to develop an evidence-centered design approach that informs our understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students.

The ALTELLA project is a partnership of five state departments of education and the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This collaboration involving Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, South Carolina, and West Virginia is funded by an Enhanced Assessment Instruments grant from the U.S. Department of Education awarded to the Arizona Department of Education. ALTELLA is housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

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## Executive Summary

English learners with the most significant cognitive disabilities are an important subgroup of students in U.S. schools; however, there is little established evidence of how this subpopulation is progressing toward their development of English proficiency in order to support their success in college, careers, and community. The purpose of this report is to show findings from 88 classroom observations and 94 follow-up interviews with educators of these classes. Classroom observations and teacher interviews took place in 11 states.

Key findings from the classroom observations and teacher interviews include:

- These students are primarily served in self-contained special education classrooms by special education instructors.
- Drills and repetition, read aloud, and total physical response were among the more frequently observed interactive tasks.
- The most frequently observed cognitive strategies were listen/repeat, use of imagery, and use of graphic organizers. The most common social/affective strategies were asking questions and encouragement/lowering affective filter.
- Pointing and verbal response were the most common ways that students demonstrated learning in the classroom. Picture cards was another typical approach.
- Asked about the development of alternate English language proficiency assessment, educators said that assessment should be interactive and include real images that are familiar to the student. The assessment should also relate to the student's experiences and the classroom curriculum. Educators also thought that the test should be individualized, if possible. Educators frequently reported that they received educator professional development in the form of teacher-to-teacher activities or that they received no support.

These results shed light on the classroom practices used to support the English language development of students who are dually identified as English learners and students with significant cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, these findings have implications for state policy, where most educators were unsure of state policies related to identification and placement of these students. Similarly, they were not always familiar with the state's English language proficiency assessment and the expectations for student participation.

## Introduction

English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are a small but important group of students in U.S. schools, and they have unique learning needs because they are both students with disabilities *and* they are multilingual (Christensen, Gholson, & Shyyan, 2018; Thurlow, Christensen, & Shyyan, 2016). Many students who have significant cognitive disabilities have challenges related to communication, defined here as “a social event that requires sending and receiving messages with shared understanding of meaning” (Huff & Christensen, 2018, p. 1). For this subset of students, language, defined here as “a structured and shared form of communication like spoken and written words, figures, characters, and gestures, or a combination of these” (Huff & Christensen, 2018, p. 2) may also be a challenge because the student may use one language—most likely English—at school and another language at home or in the community.

To add to this complexity, no formal definition of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities exists at the federal or state level, which compounds the difficulty of identifying and supporting these students in the classroom. The Alternate English Language Learning Assessment (ALTELLA) project has established the following working definition: English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are individuals who have one or more disabilities that significantly limit their intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as documented in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and who are progressing toward English language proficiency in speaking, reading, writing, and understanding (Christensen, Gholson, & Shyyan, 2018). Having a definition of this population of students is critical in ensuring that the students receive the language and disability services they are entitled to under the U.S. Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which requires state education agencies to provide for the annual assessments of the English proficiency of all students identified as English learners (Section 3111(b)(2)(G)), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, which provides for the free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities.

Currently, there is little established evidence of how English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are developing English proficiency so they can succeed in college, careers, and community. Until recently, research has not explored instructional strategies used to support the development of English for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities (Liu et al., 2013; Liu, Thurlow, & Quenemoen, 2016; Thurlow, Christensen, & Shyyan, 2016).

The ALTELLA project researches instructional practices, multitiered accessibility features and accommodations, and assessment approaches to use with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. ALTELLA supports an evidence-centered design approach that informs the project's understanding of alternate English language proficiency assessment for these students. As a component of this approach, ALTELLA began with an assumption that knowing what is happening in the classroom is critical to understanding how to assess the English language development of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

## Research Questions

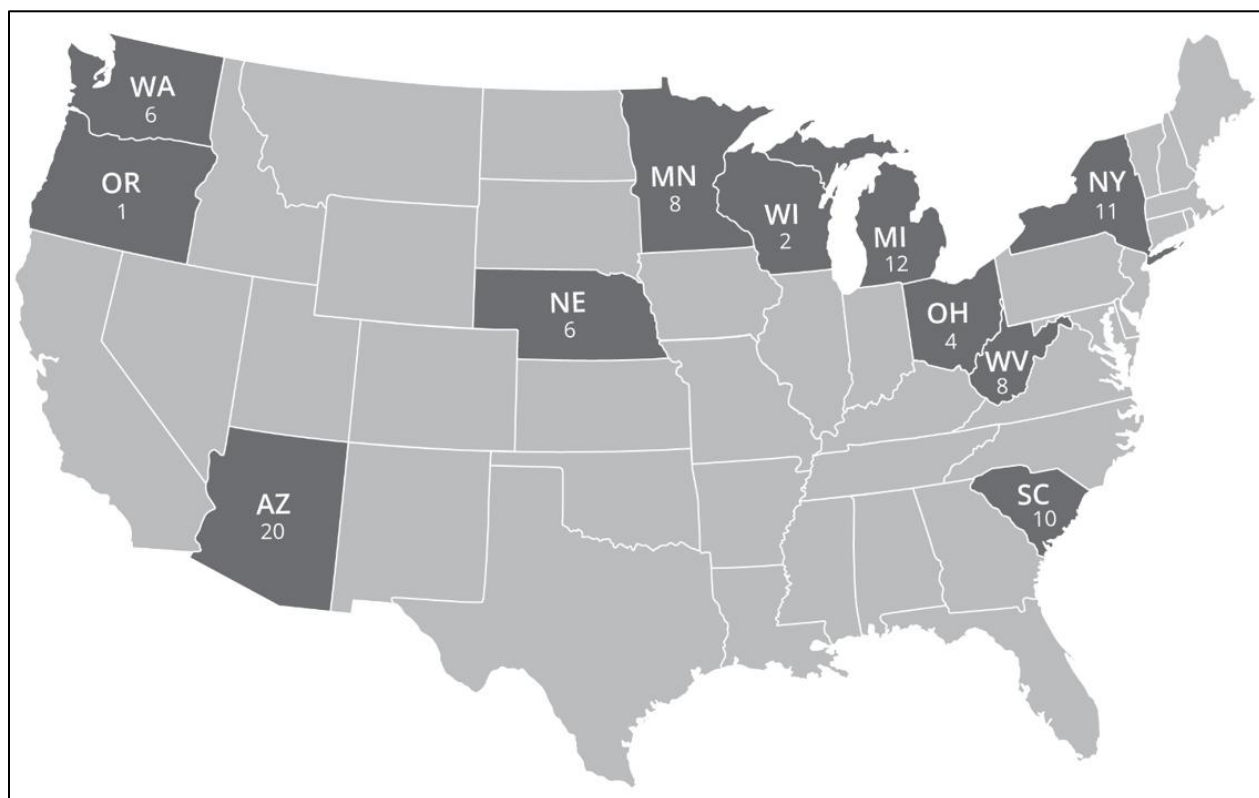
This ALTELLA report shares findings about the instructional strategies nearly 100 educators use to support the English language development of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. ALTELLA researchers conducted classroom observations and follow-up interviews with educators. The research questions that guided the observations and interviews are:

1. What are the instructional settings and other contextual circumstances where English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are learning?
2. What strategies are used by educators in the classroom to support the language development of English for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities?
3. What adaptations do educators make when working with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to address their inclusion in the classroom (approaches to expressive and receptive language use, augmentative/alternate communication devices, and other classroom accommodations)?
4. In what ways are English learners with significant cognitive disabilities assessed for home language proficiency and English proficiency?
5. How do English learners with significant cognitive disabilities participate in each domain of language development (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)?
6. What professional training or experiences do teachers currently have in supporting the English language development of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, and what additional supports would they like to have?

## Participants

Classroom observations and educator interviews were conducted during the 2017–18 school year. Initially, ALTELLA researchers invited the five state partners in the project to identify educators to participate in this study. ALTELLA project staff worked closely with these partners to identify educators who had at least one English learner with a significant cognitive disability in their classrooms. After data were gathered in these five states, the project recruited six more to reach the project goal of 100 observations and interviews. Figure 1 shows the states. In states whose students take the Alternate ACCESS for ELLs, WIDA’s assessment of English language proficiency for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, educators were often identified through their students’ participation in this assessment. In four other states, educators were identified when English learners took those states’ alternate content assessments, including the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century.

**Figure 1: Number of observations in each participating state**



N=88



## Method

Eighty-eight observations and 94 follow-up interviews were conducted in 11 geographically dispersed states (Table 1). These states included states who are a member in the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century Consortium, WIDA Consortium, and states unaffiliated with an English language proficiency assessment consortium. In some cases, more than one educator was observed in the classroom and separate interview data were collected for each educator. Two educators who were not observed were interviewed.

**Table 1: Number of observations and interviews by state**

State	Observations	Interviews
Arizona	20	20
Michigan	12	12
Minnesota	8	8
Nebraska	6	9
New York	11	11
Ohio	4	4
Oregon	1	1
South Carolina	10	11
Washington	6	7
Wisconsin	2	2
West Virginia	8	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>94</b>

Data collection instruments were developed using the National Alternate Assessment Center's student observation tool as a starting point. Using this study's research questions as a guide, questions were added or deleted to focus the observations and interviews on the strategies that educators use to support the language development of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. ALTELLA state partners and national experts reviewed the observation and interview tools and then they were piloted by ALTELLA researchers in classroom observations and interviews prior to data collection.

Two ALTELLA researchers conducted each classroom observation. The observation lasted 20 to 30 minutes. ALTELLA researchers used a protocol for the observations (Appendix A) and took descriptive field notes. After the observation, ALTELLA researchers interviewed educators for about 30 minutes. One researcher asked the interview questions and the other researcher took detailed notes. The interview also followed a protocol (Appendix B). After each classroom observation and educator interview, the research team compared field notes and reconciled any areas of disagreement. The research team transcribed and coded all notes into a database for analysis.

The ALTELLA research team analyzed the data from the observations and interviews for themes, using the study's research questions as a guide. Themes were established using a semi-structured small group discussion among the ALTELLA research team, who have shared expertise in English learners with significant cognitive disabilities and qualitative analysis. Themes were considered to be salient when they appeared in more than one participating state. Consequently, the findings reported here reflect global findings, and individual states and schools are not identified.

## Findings

The overall findings include background information from the classroom observations and educator interviews, such as grade level, instructional settings, and content areas observed. Classroom environment and tasks were recorded, as well as strategies teachers used during instruction. Students' language and communication skills were observed, as well as students' approaches to demonstrating language skills in the classroom, including their use of their home languages. Researchers followed up with educators on all these topics during the interviews. They also asked educators about informal and formal assessment topics. This study's findings include additional topics that emerged during the interviews, including language and communication, policy issues, and post-secondary transition. Finally, educators described their professional development needs.

## Context

ALTELLA researchers collected information about the types of classrooms, including instructional setting, types of educators present, and content areas observed. They also noted the level of instruction observed in the classroom using a rubric included on the observation protocol.

ALTELLA researchers observed a number of classrooms across different grade levels (Table 2). The most common grade level observed was elementary (n=39), followed by high school (n=28). The least common grade level observed was middle school (n=21). In nearly all cases, classrooms were multiple age and grade levels.

**Table 2: Schools**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Elementary	39
Middle	21
High	28
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

Students with significant cognitive disabilities who are English learners were primarily observed in self-contained classrooms with special education teachers (Table 3 and Table 4). In English language development classes, they received individual pull-out instruction or whole class push-in instruction. In one case, the observation was conducted in an art classroom, where students were integrated with non-disabled peers. Related services were provided by speech language pathologists, who provided push-in services in self-contained special education classrooms.

**Table 3: Instructional settings**

Type of Instructional Setting	Number of Classrooms
General education class	1
English language development class	6
Special education class with non-disabled peers	1
Special education class with students with disabilities only	81
Related services	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>

Note. N=88. Observers could choose more than one instructional setting.

**Table 4: Instructional arrangement**

Type of Instructional Arrangement	Number of Classrooms
Large group instruction	57
Small group instruction	21
Independent work	8
1:1 instruction	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>

Note. N=88. Observers could choose more than one instructional arrangement.

The average number of students in the classrooms observed was six, with an average of two students being English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Class size ranged from one to 23 students, with one to 14 English learners with significant cognitive disabilities.

Three classrooms had more than one instructional setting observed. In one case, observers saw students in a special education classroom and an English language development class. In another classroom, part of the observation included instruction with special education students only, followed by a short period where students worked with non-disabled peers. Finally, in a third class, an English language development specialist worked with one English learner, while another English learner worked with a special education teacher. Observers noted the types of educators who taught. In most cases, the special education teacher provided instruction (Table 5). However, paraprofessionals and English as a

second language/bilingual instructors were also observed providing instruction in a variety of ways, including large group, small group, and individual instruction. More than one educator was observed providing instruction when students received instruction in small groups or worked individually with an educator. Observers also noted the gender of the primary educator in each class observed (Table 6). Some students experienced large group and small group or individual instruction during the observation.

**Table 5: Types of educators who delivered instruction**

<b>Type of Educator Delivering Instruction</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
General education teacher	2
English as a second language/bilingual education teacher	15
Special education teacher	70
Paraprofessional	27
Related service provider	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>

Note. N=88. Observers could choose more than one educator.

**Table 6: Gender of primary educator**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Female	78
Male	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

During the interviews, ALTELLA researchers asked about the educators' years of experience overall and with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Experience in education ranged from half a year to 40 years, with an average of 14 years. Their experience with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities ranged from half a year to 32 years, with an average of 8 years.

ALTELLA researchers observed a variety of content areas, including English language arts, math, science, and English language development (Table 7). Additional observed content areas included social studies, current events, art, and student circle/calendar time, which consists of but is not limited to covering days of the week, month, weather, letter of the week, number of the week.

**Table 7: Content areas**

Content area	Number of Classrooms
English language arts	31
Math	26
Science	6
English language development	12
Other	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>

Note. N=88. Observers could choose more than one educator.

ALTELLA researchers noted the instructional level observed (Table 8). In general, a wide range of instructional levels were observed, with the most common being that the instruction was linked to the grade level curriculum but might have been a lower grade level. “English language development” was included because, in some cases, the pull-out instruction observed did not appear to be directly connected to the grade level curriculum. For example, in one school, an upper elementary student was practicing making sentences using common animal names.

**Table 8: Instructional level**

Level	Number of Classrooms
English language development	8
Instruction is on the grade-level general curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as other typical students of that age and grade level)	7
Instruction is linked to the grade level general curriculum but may be at a lower grade level	54
Instruction is delivered in the context of the grade-level general curriculum but on different, non academic skills (i.e., student uses the same materials in the same activities as other students but the expectations for learning are about something else—social, motor, etc.)	6
Instruction is not linked to or delivered in the context of grade-level general curriculum	9
Instruction rationale was not clear	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

Overall, ALTELLA researchers observed students to be primarily served in self-contained classrooms with special education teachers. In some schools, the English language specialist provided pull-out or push-in services; in a few cases, the English language specialist also consulted with the special education teacher. However, in many schools, although the English language specialist served on the student's IEP team, the special education teacher reported that the English language specialist rarely provided services or interacted with the English learners in the special education classroom. Educators also noted that English language goals are not typically written into IEPs. "I didn't even know you could have that," one educator commented.

In some cases, educators noted that limited resources were a factor in determining how students received services. An English language specialist said she was uncertain a student would benefit from English development services, and so she had exited the student from services because she had too many other students to serve. In another case, the English language specialist noted that if he had to attend each student's IEP team meeting, he would likely spend all of his time in meetings and have no time to instruct his students.

Only in two classrooms did English learners with significant cognitive disabilities interact with chronologically age-appropriate, general education peers. In one classroom, students with disabilities worked with peer mentors. In the other classroom, students with disabilities attended art class with same-age peers.

## **Instruction**

ALTELLA researchers were interested in the instructional environment of each classroom, including technology, activities, and strategies.

### **Instructional Environment**

Observations about instructional environment covered the use of chronologically age-appropriate materials, the educators' expectations for what the English learner with significant cognitive disabilities should learn from those materials, accommodations, and educator and student use of technology.

Researchers noted when educators used chronologically age-appropriate materials (Table 9). In most classrooms, observers judged materials to be age-appropriate. Inappropriate materials included a shape-sorting toy in a high school classroom, a preschool picture book used in an upper elementary classroom, and an Elmo stuffed toy in a high school classroom. In a few middle and high school classrooms, students sang songs common in preschool or early elementary classrooms, such as "The Wheels on the Bus" and "If You're Happy and You Know It." In one high school classroom, however, the educator led the class in a short, adapted Zumba routine as a stretch break for the students.

Most educators had the same expectations for learning for all of their students, both English learners and non-English learners (Table 9). In a few situations, observers were in classrooms during less than optimal times, including one class where a student was having behavioral difficulties. In another class, the observation had been scheduled during a time when the teacher was required at a school meeting. In another instance, the classroom teacher left the classroom to attend to a matter in different part of the school.

Most cases, educators provided some level of individualized instruction for students, including the use of accommodations (Table 9), including special furniture, eye gaze boards, picture schedules, and AAC devices.

**Table 9: Instructional environment**

<b>Y/N</b>	<b>Teacher uses chronologically age-appropriate materials</b>	<b>Teacher has same expectations for learning</b>	<b>Teacher allows for accommodations</b>
Yes	76	85	84
No	12	3	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>

No technology of any kind was used in 22 classrooms. In the other 66 classrooms, educators most frequently used smartboards to teach, then computers (Table 10). Other examples of technology observed in classrooms included projectors, whiteboards, MacBooks, a large screen television, a guitar, a piano, and calculators.

ALTELLA researchers asked educators about students and technology, whether they could use tools independently and whether they liked doing so. Educators discussed a variety of tools, particularly AAC devices that included Chromebooks and iPads. For the most part, students used supports independently, educators reported, except when they needed prompting. Educators commented that students liked using these tools, particularly iPads because of games that could be played for education purposes or as a reward for working. One educator said technology “opens up a world of ability” for their students. In several instances, students did not like the devices. According to one educator, the student would rather speak than use an AAC device.

**Table 10: Technology students used**

<b>Technology</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Computer	22
Chromebook	1
iPad	14
Smartboard	43
Other	22
No technology observed	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>

Note: N=88. Observers could choose more than one technology.

## Classroom Tasks

Researchers kept track of the types of interactive tasks used during the observation period (Table 11). The most common were drills and repetition (n=62), read aloud (n=34), and total physical response (n=34). Jigsaw activities, interviews, and role plays were not observed, perhaps because these activities are more complex and hard to observe in a short period of time. In addition, these activities can be completed as a culmination of a lesson; typically, researchers observed units that were in earlier stages of instruction. Researchers marked tasks as “other,” including direct instruction, singing, and multistep tasks.



**Table 11: Interactive tasks observed in classrooms**

<b>Interactive task</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Cloze	11
Cooperative learning	9
Drills/repetition	62
Experiential learning	11
Guessing game	27
Information gap activities	5
Interviews	0
Jigsaw tasks	0
Negotiating meaning	29
Problem solving	16
Read aloud	34
Retelling a story/event	9
Role play	0
Simulations	4
Total physical response	34
Other	43
None	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>295</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

## Strategies Used During Instruction

ALTELLA researchers were interested in how students demonstrated their understanding and in the instructional strategies educators used to present information to students and to ensure that students could show what they knew and could do. Researchers collected information on how students responded, and on educators' cognitive and social/affective strategies.

Students used different response strategies in the classrooms observed, often combining verbal response, pointing, and eye gaze (Table 12). Students frequently used picture cards, which were typically annotated in English only. "Other" included signing, raising hands, singing, writing on individual chalkboards, and using AAC devices.

**Table 12: Types of responses students used to demonstrate understanding of content**

Type of response	Number of Classrooms
Adapted keyboards	2
Bilingual resources	1
Custom overlays	4
Dictation	3
Drawing	12
Eye gaze	25
Picture cards	41
Pointing	73
Switches	16
Verbal response	66
Word prediction	4
Other	60
Not observed	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>309</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

ALTELLA observers also noted a wide range of cognitive strategies that special education and English language development teachers used in the classrooms (Table 13). The most commonly observed were “listen/repeat” (n=78), “use of imagery” (n=45), and “use of graphic organizers” (n=32). In addition, 29 special education and English language development teachers used “pronunciation/phonetic strategies.” Examples marked as “other” included rephrasing, manipulatives, and picture cards.

**Table 13: Cognitive strategies educators used**

<b>Cognitive strategy</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Adapted keyboards	2
Bilingual resources	1
Custom overlays	4
Dictation	3
Drawing	12
Eye gaze	25
Picture cards	41
Pointing	73
Switches	16
Verbal response	66
Word prediction	4
Other	60
Not observed	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>309</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

In terms of social/affective strategies used by educators, observers recorded “asking questions” (n=85) and “encouragement/lowering affective filter” (n=83) as the most common social/affective strategies (Table 14).

**Table 14: Social/affective strategies educators used**

<b>Social/affective strategy</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Asking questions	85
Encouragement, lowering affective filter	83
Social-mediating activities, empathizing	28
Overcoming limitations in speaking through circumlocution, gestures, coining words, etc.	29
Not observed	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>227</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

During interviews, educators were asked about their strategies to support language development of their students. Usually, the strategies they mentioned mirrored those most commonly observed, such as visuals and picture cards. In several instances, educators talked about the importance of knowing their students as individuals, including knowing what motivates the student. Educators also focused on special education strategies, including communication strategies, more than language development strategies. Educators often commented that “All of my students are English language learners” or “special education strategies work for English learner students.” Another comment

educators sometimes shared was “good teaching is good teaching.”

## Language and Communication Skills

ALTELLA researchers observed ways that students communicated in the classroom and used expressive and receptive language. They also noted the language-based resources educators used to help students access instruction. Observers recorded when students had ways to communicate that matched the student’s communication level (n=74) (Table 15). In most classrooms, students were observed to have a way to communicate, including AAC devices, picture exchange cards, and eye gaze. When observers marked “No,” students were usually non-verbal. These students did not have AACs devices or use picture exchange cards. Other students used limited speech in their home language only. For example, in a lesson about science, the student spoke key vocabulary terms in Spanish.

**Table 15: Presence of students’ ways of communication that matches their level of communication**

<b>Student has a way to communicate that matches their communication level and includes the appropriate content?</b>	<b>Number of Classrooms</b>
Yes	74
No	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>

## Demonstrating Language Skills

ALTELLA researchers explored ways in which students demonstrated language skills in the classroom, including tracking the use of receptive and expressive language, and language domains (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Receptive language domains (reading and listening) were observed in every classroom. In two cases, observers did not document the use of expressive language domains (writing and speaking). One observation consisted primarily of the teacher talking and the students listening. In another classroom, the teacher focused on redirecting student behavior, and the students were not observed using expressive language.

In addition to receptive and expressive language, observers noted the ways in which students demonstrated their language skills (Table 16). Students most frequently used pointing (n=77) and head nods (n=69). Verbalization (n=31) and vocalization (n=34) were noted in roughly a third of the classrooms. Less common approaches included signing (n=25) and AAC devices (n=25). Educators sometimes commented in follow-up interviews that students did not have AAC devices but were being considered for one. Other educators mentioned their students did not like using AAC devices. One teacher talked about rewarding the student for using the device. Another teacher said a student would push the AAC device away when it was offered.

**Table 16: Extent by which students demonstrate language skills in observed classrooms**

Means of communication demonstrated	Number of Classrooms
Adaptive equipment (AAC)	25
Head nods	69
Picture exchange cards	16
Pointing	77
Signing	25
Verbal levels	4
Verbalization	31
Vocalizations	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>281</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

ALTELLA researchers noted the language domains observed in each classroom (Table 17), with listening (n=83) and speaking (n=83) being most common. In some cases, only one domain was observed. Reading was observed in 74 classrooms. Observers noted “reading” if the student was presented with classroom materials that included print, such as books, worksheets, or picture cards. Writing was noted in 43 classrooms when educators gave students opportunities to write words, draw, or solve math problems on a worksheet, chalkboard, whiteboard, or electronic device.

**Table 17: Language domains observed in classrooms**

Domain	Number of Classrooms
Listening	25
Speaking	69
Reading	16
Writing	77
<b>Total</b>	<b>281</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

Researchers also tracked ways students had access to instruction through language strategies used (Table 18). These access approaches included picture cards (n=53), simplified syntax (n=45), and concrete objects (n=30). Concrete objects included books, stuffed animals, toys, and food. Among items included as “other” were signing, pictures, and manipulatives. Manipulatives included counting blocks and other math manipulatives. In three classrooms, bilingual resources were observed; these included color words in Spanish on the wall and name cards in Yiddish. In one school, the administration had labeled words throughout the building in the student’s home language, Swedish. In another school, the teacher shared that the student was encouraged to check out books in Spanish from the library.

**Table 18: Options for language access to instruction provided to students in observed classrooms**

Option for language access to instruction	Number of Classrooms
Concrete objects	30
Bilingual resources	3
Picture cards	53
Simplified syntax	45
Symbol based text	16
Tactile cues	23
Text reader	11
Other	66
None	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

Researchers noted how students demonstrated what they were learning in the classroom (Table 19). Pointing (n=76) and verbal response (n=63) were the most common ways that students demonstrated learning. Picture cards (n=45) was another typical approach to demonstrating learning in the classroom. Observers noted several instances of “other” (n=63); these included word cards, manipulatives, writing, and guided manipulation.

**Table 19: Options allowing students to demonstrate what they know or are learning**

Option allowing student to demonstrate	Number of Classrooms
Adapted keyboards	2
Bilingual resources	2
Custom overlays	9
Dictation	3
Drawing	12
Eye gaze	22
Picture cards	45
Pointing	76
Switches	14
Verbal response	63
Word prediction	8
Other	63
None	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>321</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

### Home Language Use in the Classroom

ALTELLA researchers observed the use of the student’s home language in the classroom. In most cases, the educator or student did not use the student’s home language (see Table 20

for details). In most cases where the student's home language was used in the classroom, the language used was Spanish. In one case, the teacher and student used Yiddish.

**Table 20: Home language use in observed classrooms**

<b>Y/N</b>	<b>Instruction provides student opportunities to use English and their home language</b>	<b>Student utilizes English and their home language in the classroom</b>
Yes	14	19
No	74	69
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>88</b>

In most classrooms that used the student's home language, the teacher or the paraprofessionals spoke Spanish minimally, only using single words or short phrases (e.g., "hola," "más agua"). Many of these teachers paired the Spanish word with its English translation. In scenarios where the home language was used, it would be for basic academic vocabulary; for example, food. Apart from academics, teachers used Spanish to redirect a student to the task or change behavior. For example, a special educator had a student in her class who was very receptive to her home language, Spanish. This teacher would call the student by her name and say "mira, look." There were no cases in which teachers, paraprofessionals or the students themselves used the student's home language for extensive discourse during the observations.

In interviews, most educators indicated they had limited knowledge of the students' proficiency in their home languages. One educator responded, "If you want to know what the language is, I'll need to get their file."

However, at one school, the English language specialist spoke Spanish and worked closely with a new student who had just moved from Puerto Rico. The specialist helped the student bridge her understanding of the academic content by pre-teaching her key concepts in Spanish. In another situation, an educator used Google to translate basic words and phrases into Spanish so that she could support her student's understanding of time and money in English.

Some educators noted that they had tried to use Spanish with their students, with varying degrees of success. In one case, the educator commented that the student "just looked at me and laughed." Other educators shared similar experiences. It is not clear from these examples if these students were reflecting on the educators' ability to speak Spanish, or if the students were surprised to hear Spanish in their primarily English speaking classrooms.

## **Assessment Topics**

During interviews, educators discussed assessment topics, including how their English learners with significant cognitive disabilities participated in their state's English language

proficiency assessments, types of informal assessments used in the classroom, and educators' preferences for the design of an alternate English language proficiency assessment.

ALTELLA researchers noted the types of informal assessment approaches used by educators during the observation (Table 21). Eighty-five educators used recall/routine tasks. For example, during circle time, an educator asked the student to pick out the word that says "Tuesday." Discriminate similarities/differences was observed in 32 classrooms, activities that included sorting vowel sounds, distinguishing colors such as red and blue, solving math problems with greater than/less than, and matching. Application was also observed (n=21), activities involving making a recipe, drawing self-portraits, and cutting cookies into four pieces as part of a math exercise. Strategic informal assessment approaches were observed four times. In one case, the educator had students working at math stations around the room. Each student had to complete activities at each station; part of the teacher's approach was allowing the students to choose what to work on first, next, and last. Only one observation involved an extended informal assessment approach. In this class, the English learner with a significant cognitive disability was modeling how to tell time using a classroom clock manipulative.

**Table 21: Information assessment in observed classrooms**

Type of assessment	Number of Classrooms
Recall/routine task (recall fact, information, or procedure)	85
Discriminate similarities/differences (simple analysis of presented concepts)	32
Application (use of conceptual knowledge in new and concrete situations)	21
Strategic (requires reasoning, developing a plan or sequence of steps)	4
Extended (requires an investigation, time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>

Note: N=88. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

## Assessment Participation

Researchers asked educators how their English learners with disabilities participated in their state's English language proficiency assessment. Responses often reflected whether the state had an alternate English language proficiency assessment. Educators from states that use WIDA's Alternate ACCESS for ELLs noted that determining how the student would participate in the assessment was an IEP team decision. In general, educators commented



that they were not certain about the purpose of the English language proficiency assessment for their English learner students with significant cognitive disabilities. Not all educators in states that administered Alternate ACCESS for ELLs were familiar with the assessment. Some educators reported a district test coordinator or English learner coordinator assessed English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Teachers generally noted that they had not seen score reports and did not include information from Alternate ACCESS for ELLs scores in developing IEP goals for students or for instructional planning. Teachers also mentioned they did not think their students took the assessment seriously or that the results were an accurate reflection of the student's English language proficiency.

Four of the states participating in this research project administered the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century. In these cases, educators sometimes mentioned their students had attempted to participate in the assessment; educators also mentioned they documented domain exemptions for students or that students had not participated. In the remaining states, educators acknowledged their students did not participate in any English language proficiency assessment.

### Informal Language Assessment

Educators were asked about their approaches to assessing student English language development in the classroom. In response, educators often talked about informal approaches to English assessment; however, a few educators also mentioned they informally assessed the student's language skills in the student's home language. Although researchers did not collect this information systematically, they noted that educators often said they did not speak the student's home language and so they were unsure how to assess the students' proficiency in their home languages. Other educators said they sometimes asked parents or siblings about the student's language and communication skills at home.

Many educators admitted that they did not informally evaluate student use of English in the classroom. Those who did mentioned observations, asking questions, and using a communication binder to track progress. With regard to observations, educators noted that these were often informal and conducted at different intervals, sometimes daily and less often than other times. Educators noted they evaluated students' language development by observing student peer interactions.

### Assessment Development

Educators discussed their preferences for the development of an alternate assessment of English language proficiency. In responding to this question, educators often shared their perspectives on their state's alternate content assessment and suggested approaches for

future assessment development.

Many teachers expressed concerns about the alternate content assessments, saying they were too long or too hard, and included topics that were not always relevant to their students. When the assessment was available online, they often noted the assessment required scrolling on the screen, which was difficult for some students.

When asked about the development of an alternate English language proficiency assessment, nearly every educator said it should be interactive and include real images that are familiar to the student. This assessment should relate to the student's experiences and the classroom curriculum. Listening or reading passages should be kept short, they said.

Educators also thought that the assessment should be individualized, if possible, by differentiating for different skill areas so students could demonstrate a wide range of skills. Some teachers mentioned the assessment should include performance tasks or portfolio options. Educators noted that a way to end the assessment would be important if a student was unable to, or refused to respond to, a specified number of prompts.

Educators were somewhat split between technology and paper formats for administering an assessment. Educators noted that technology formats may be more secure and in some cases more motivating to students. However, other educators said some students had limited technology skills and would need a paper option.

## **Other Interview Themes**

In the interviews with educators, a number of themes emerged, including a focus on communication rather than language, limited understanding of policies related to student participation in English language proficiency assessments, and post-secondary transition.

### **Communication and Language**

Educators discussed the importance of supporting their students in the development of communication skills. Educators frequently commented that "all of my students are English language learners," even when few of the students in the educator's classroom were considered English learners. Similarly, educators rarely referenced the role of language and culture in supporting their English learners in the classroom; rather, most educators focused on speaking English with their students with little consideration of the student's proficiency in English or their home language. However, one educator shared that she had made a "cheat sheet" of key words and phrases in Spanish so that she could communicate via text with the student's parents.

In some cases, educators discussed their efforts to use the student's home language in the classroom. Sometimes, educators commented that students would simply laugh at the

educators for trying to speak the student's home language. Other educators noted use of a home language in the classroom motivated students. One educator commented a student was "more excited to talk a bit in Spanish than to speak all in English."

Several observations and interviews were conducted in a school district that provides bilingual dual immersion programming for English learners who have significant cognitive disabilities. These observations were conducted during the extended school year programming, which is provided primarily in English. However, during the academic school year, the district offers bilingual dual immersion classes in Spanish, Chinese, and Yiddish, among other languages.

Educators were also more attentive to issues of language and culture when students were newcomers. In one school, the special education teacher had sought out collaboration with the English language development teacher to support the language development of a new student from Puerto Rico. The two educators recognized that the student had limited experience with schooling in Puerto Rico, and they worked together closely to help bridge language and culture for the student. For example, they pre-taught key vocabulary related to upcoming school activities.

Educators also reported that school administrators shared this limited distinction between language and communication. They noted that students with significant cognitive disabilities were typically served by special education staff rather than English language development staff. One educator recalled a time when her administrator told her "you're Sped [sic], you can handle this."

## Policy Understanding

Educators often demonstrated a limited understanding of the role of state policies for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Educators were uncertain as to how their students had been identified as English learners. When asked about identification, they relied on the home language survey, a short questionnaire completed by parents or caregivers as part of school enrollment. Educators were uncertain about whether students also completed English language screening assessments, although they did note that the screeners in use are not accessible to students with significant disabilities.

Middle and high school educators were sometimes surprised that their students were still classified as English learners. In many states, policies relating to exiting students with disabilities from English language services have not been fully developed and implemented and so their students may retain an English learner designation even when they demonstrate similar or better English language skills than their classmates. Reflecting on this issue, one teacher stated, "I think a lot of kids are just labelled [English language learners], but they're actually not."

## Post-Secondary Transition

One topic that emerged from interviews with educators, particularly at the high school level, was post-secondary transition. Educators were not always clear about how students would use English and their home language in post-secondary settings. For example, one educator talked about how his student was interested in working in a mechanic shop after high school. The small town where the educator and the student lived in was home to one mechanic shop where the owner spoke English and another where the owner spoke Spanish. The teacher was not sure where the student was hoping to work, and as a result, the teacher recognized the importance of the student having the language skills to be prepared to work in either mechanic shop.

## Educator Professional Development

At the conclusion of the interviews, educators were asked about the types of professional development they had received to support their English learners with significant cognitive disabilities (Table 22). If educators were primarily special education teachers, they were asked about the types of English language development professional learning they had received. If the educators were primarily teachers of English language development, they were asked about the special education professional development they had received. Most commonly reported types of professional development included teacher-to-teacher activities (n=29) and no support (n=29). Formal professional development activities (n=27) and school based activities (n=27) were also mentioned regularly by educators. The most common responses in “other” included sheltered English immersion certification that one state requires for all educators and courses educators had taken in college. Due to time restrictions with the educators’ schedules, not all educators were able to answer this question.

**Table 22: Types of professional development received by educators**

Type of professional development	Number of Educators
Formal professional development activities	27
School-based activities	27
Teacher-to-teacher activities	29
Technical assistance	18
Receive no support	29
Other	16
Not available	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>159</b>

Note: N=94. Observers marked multiple responses for this item.

Educators were also asked about the formats of professional development they find most helpful (Table 23). Responses to this open-ended question ranged widely, and included face-to-face (n=31); online, videos, and virtual reality (n=18); and classroom observations (n=10). Due to time restrictions with the educators' schedules, not all educators were able to answer this question.

Table 23: Types of professional development found most helpful by educators

<b>Format of professional development</b>	<b>Number of Educators</b>
Face-to-face	31
Virtual (e.g., online, videos, virtual reality)	18
Hybrid	3
Meeting with other teachers	6
Teacher observations	10
Classes	2
Hands on activities	6
Not available	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>

Note: N=94. Observers marked multiple responses for this item. Not all educators responded to this question.

## Discussion

The findings from these classroom observations and interviews shed light on the classroom practices educators use to support the English language development of students who are dually identified as English learners and as students with significant cognitive disabilities. The findings demonstrate that most of these students receive instruction in self-contained special education classrooms with educators who have had little formal professional development to support their students' language development needs. Most of the strategies used by educators tend to be more aligned with special education practices than language development approaches. Educators were open to professional development that would support their facility in working with these students; educators suggested formats for professional development.

The findings from these classroom observations and interviews also show that educators generally had a wide range of familiarity with the role of student home language and culture in the classroom. In some cases, the educators were unsure of basic student data, such as the home language. In other cases, educators supported the student home language development through bilingual dual immersion programs. Educators sometimes emphasized the importance of knowing their students; however, educators rarely emphasized the cultural dimensions inherent in that knowledge

The findings have implications for state policy. Educators often stated that they were

unclear about state policies related to identification and placement of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. Similarly, they were not always familiar with their state's English language proficiency assessment and the expectations for student participation. Educators also were not always knowledgeable of state policies related to the use of home language in the classroom.

This study had a few limitations. One key limitation is that state departments of education were not always sure how to identify classrooms that had English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. State education agency contacts often approached finding classrooms by looking for English learner designations in their state's alternate assessment database, which meant that finding classrooms that included untested grades (e.g., kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and some high school grades) was more challenging. Another limitation was that the observations were intentionally kept short—roughly 20 minutes—and educators may have used different strategies or more complex tasks outside of this study's observation period.

## Conclusion

This research by the ALTELLA project reflects an initial effort to learn more about the strategies educators use to support the English language development of their students who are English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. As states continue to work toward an increased understanding of how to instruct and assess the English language development of students in this small, but important population, it is important to keep the focus on these students and their teachers. As one educator stated, “In our classroom, we’re ALL teachers.” In improving educational outcomes for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, researchers, policy makers, and administrators may do well to take the time to develop their own classroom perspectives, recognizing that there is much to learn from these educators and their students.

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## Appendix A: Classroom Observation Protocol

### Research Questions

1. What are the instructional settings and other contextual circumstances where ELs with significant cognitive disabilities are learning?
2. What adaptations do educators make when working with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to address their inclusion in the classroom (approaches to expressive and receptive language use, AAC, and other classroom accommodations)?
3. What strategies are used by educators in the classroom to support the language development of English for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities?
4. How do English learners with significant cognitive disabilities participate in each domain of language development (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)?



## ALTELLA Classroom Observation Protocol

Code:	School:
Grade:	Date:
Total # of students:	Observation start time:
# of ELs with SCDs:	Observation end time: :
Teacher ID:	Teacher Years of Experience:
Observer:	Years of Experience at School:

**1. Instructional Setting** (choose the best description)

- ☐ General Education Class
- ☐ English Language Development class
- ☐ Special Education class with non-disabled peers
- ☐ Special Education class with students with disabilities only
- ☐ Homebound/hospital
- ☐ Related services (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Instructional Group Arrangement** (indicate all those observed)

- ☐ Large group instruction
- ☐ Small group instruction
- ☐ Independent work
- ☐ 1:1 instruction
- ☐ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Content Area Observed** (check all that apply)

- ☐ English Language Arts
- ☐ Math
- ☐ Science
- ☐ English Language Development
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Instruction Delivery** (indicate all those observed)

- ☐ Instruction delivered by general education teacher
- ☐ Instruction delivered by special education teacher
- ☐ Instruction delivered collaboratively by general and special education teachers
- ☐ Instruction delivered by ESL/bilingual education teacher
- ☐ Instruction delivered by paraprofessional
- ☐ Instruction delivered by peer/peer tutor
- ☐ Instruction delivered by related service provider

**5. Instruction Level** (choose the best description)

- ☐ Instruction is on the grade level general curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as other typical students of that age and grade level)
- ☐ Instruction is linked to the grade level general curriculum but may be at a lower grade level
- ☐ Instruction is delivered in the context of the grade level general curriculum but on different, non-academic skills (i.e., student uses the same materials in the same activities as other students but the expectations for learning are about something else – social, motor, etc.)
- ☐ Instruction is not linked to or delivered in the context of grade level general curriculum
- ☐ Instruction rationale was not clear.

**Place + or – in the designated box to indicate whether the observation indicator was present or not.**

Observation Indicator	+/-	Notes
<p>6. The instructor uses technology in the classroom.</p> <p>Check all that apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Computer</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Chromebook</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> iPad</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Smartboard</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other (explain in notes)</li> </ul>		<p><i>(On the left, check all that is being used. Below, list technology that is present in classroom but not used during observation.)</i></p>
7. Teacher uses (a) chronologically age-appropriate materials		
b) with same expectations for learning,		
c) and allowing for accommodations.		

<p>8. During <i>instruction</i>, the teacher allows option(s) for the student to demonstrate what they know or are learning.</p> <p>Check all that apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> adapted keyboards</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> bilingual resources</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> custom overlays</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> dictation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> drawing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> eye gaze</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> picture cards</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> pointing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> switches</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> verbal response</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> word prediction</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> other (explain in notes)</li> </ul>		
<p>9. <i>Student</i> response demonstrating understanding of content is specifically designed for individual students.</p> <p>Check all that apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> adapted keyboards</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> bilingual resources</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> custom overlays</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> dictation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> drawing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> eye gaze</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> picture cards</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> pointing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> switches</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> verbal response</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> word prediction</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> other (explain in notes)</li> </ul>		

<p>10. The <i>instruction</i> provides various options for the student to have access to the instruction.</p> <p>Check all that apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> concrete objects</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> bilingual resources</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> picture cards</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> simplified syntax</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> symbol based text</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> tactile cues</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> text reader</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> other (explain in notes)</li> </ul>		
<p>11. In class, the <i>student</i> has a way to communicate that matches his/her communication level and includes the appropriate content.</p>		
<p>12. <i>Informal assessment</i> observed:</p> <p>Expectation for students at this level is set at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> recall/routine task (recall fact, information, or procedure)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> discriminate similarities/differences (simple analysis of presented concepts)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> application (use of conceptual knowledge in new and concrete situations)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> strategic (requires reasoning, developing a plan or a sequence of steps)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> extended (requires an investigation, time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem)</li> </ul>		<p><i>(Observers will get trained in recognizing each depth of knowledge. Examples will be provided.)</i></p>

<p>13. The <i>instruction</i> incorporates interactive tasks that facilitate the development of authentic communication skills.</p> <p>Check all that are observed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> cloze</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> cooperative learning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> drills/ repetition</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> experiential learning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> guessing game</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> information gap activities</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> interviews</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> jigsaw tasks</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> negotiating meaning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> problem solving</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> read aloud</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> retelling a story/ event</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> role-play</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> simulations</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> TPR (Total Physical Response)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> other (explain in notes)</li> </ul>		<p><i>(Observers will get trained in recognizing each interactive task. Examples will be provided.)</i></p>
<p>14. <i>Instruction</i> and activities facilitate the student's interactions with chronologically age-appropriate, general education peers.</p> <p>(must be more than provision of the opportunity: the student must interact or be facilitated to interact)</p>		
<p>15. The <i>instruction</i> provides the students opportunities to demonstrate language skills.</p> <p>Check all that are observed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> expressive language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> receptive language</li> </ul>		

<p>16. The <i>student</i> responds to opportunities to demonstrate language skills.</p> <p>Check all that are observed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> receptive language</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> expressive language</li> </ul> <p>To what extent?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> head nods</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> picture exchange cards (PECS)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> pointing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> signing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> verbal levels</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> verbalization</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> vocalizations</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> adaptive equipment (AAC)</li> </ul> <p>Please note if listening, speaking, reading, or writing were observed.</p>		
<p>17. The <i>instruction</i> provides the student opportunities to use English <u>and</u> his or her home language.</p>		
<p>18. The <i>student</i> utilizes both English <u>and</u> his or her home language in the classroom.</p>		

<p>19. The use of language learning strategies is evident in the lesson.</p> <p>Check all that are observed:</p> <p><b>Cognitive strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> bilingual support materials</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> classification</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> goal setting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> learning styles</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> listening/repeat</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> making inferences</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> note taking, highlighting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> other mnemonic strategies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> pronunciation/phonetic strategies</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> self-evaluation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> use of graphic organizers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> use of imagery</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> use of real objects/role play</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> visuals to imagery</li> </ul> <p><b>Social/affective strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> asking questions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> encouragement, lowering affective filter</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> social-mediating activities, empathizing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> overcoming limitations in speaking through circumlocution, gestures, coining words, etc.</li> </ul>		<p><i>(Observers will get trained in recognizing each language learning strategy. Examples will be provided.)</i></p>
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## Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol

### ALTELLA Interview Introduction

Thank you for allowing us to observe your class today. We are \_\_\_\_\_ and

and we are working with a project based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Our project, called the Alternate English Language Learning Assessment Project, or ALTELLA, is trying to learn more about students with significant cognitive disabilities who are also English learners. The goal is to use this work to inform the development of an assessment of English development, which is a federal requirement.

We really enjoyed observing your class, and now we are hoping to ask you some questions about what we saw as well as ask some other questions related to the strategies you use to promote language development in your class. We are not recording our conversation, but we will be taking notes that will be compiled with the data we collect from other schools. We are keeping track of what states we get information from, but in our reporting, we won't use your name, your students' names, your school's name, or your district. Your state department helped us find you, but we also won't reveal any identifying information when we share our findings with your state.

If you have any questions about or project or want to tell us anything after we leave today, here is more information on the project, along with the principal investigator's contact information.

Do you have any questions for us before we start?

### Research Questions

1. What strategies are used by educators in the classroom to support the language development of English for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities?
2. What adaptations do educators make when working with English learners with significant cognitive disabilities to address their inclusion in the classroom (approaches to expressive and receptive language use, AAC, and other classroom accommodations)?
3. What professional training or experiences do teachers currently have in supporting the English language development of English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, and what additional supports would they like to have?
4. In what ways are English learners with significant cognitive disabilities assessed for home language proficiency and English proficiency?



## ALTELLA Teacher Interview Protocol

Code:

School:

Grade:

Date:

Total # of students:

Observation start time:

# of ELs with SCDs:

Observation end time:

Teacher ID:

Teacher Years of Experience:

Observer:

Years of Experience at School:

*Intro Script: Thank you for letting us observe your class today! Now we would like to hear more about what strategies and adaptations you utilize in the classroom, as well as how English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are assessed, and what types of supports you have or wish you had in these areas.*

### Observation of Classroom Instruction

1. Tell us a little about the lesson we observed today. What were your goals for the lesson? Were these goals based on standards? If so, what standards?

(Prompt: Language development goals? Grade-level content goals? Functional goals? Participate in a short reflection with the teacher)

2. In the class that we observed today, what kinds of disabilities were present? What kinds of languages are spoken in the home of the student?

3. Would you say we observed typical behavior today? Specifically, how would you describe your students on these four domains during today's observation? (Show teachers item and let them select answers)

Students' **performance** (as compared to themselves) during the observation is best described as:

- ☐ Typical or usual
- ☐ Atypical high or better than usual
- ☐ Atypical low

Students' **communication** (as compared to themselves) during the observation period was:

- ☐ Typical or usual
- ☐ Atypical high or better than usual
- ☐ Atypical low

Students' **attention** (as compared to themselves) during the observation period was:

- ☐ Typical or usual
- ☐ Atypical high or better than usual
- ☐ Atypical low

Students' **level of independence** (as compared to themselves) during the observation is best described as:

- ☐ Typical or usual
- ☐ Atypical high or better than usual
- ☐ Atypical low

4. What were some relevant strategies you used to help students learn today's lesson? What strategies supported the language development of English for the student?

How did you decide to use those strategies?

5. Are there strategies that you find helpful, but weren't observed today?
6. What accessibility features and accommodations or assistive technology do your current ELs with significant cognitive disabilities use in class? (Prompt if necessary: In what ways does classroom instruction allow options for the students to have access to the instruction, demonstrate what they know, and maintain interest and participation?)

Does the student use these supports independently?

When do they use these supports (e.g., for all activities, only on tests)?

How do the students seem to feel about using them?

## Inquiry of Language Assessment

7. How do your ELs with significant cognitive disabilities participate in the state English proficiency assessment? (Prompt: Remind teachers that their answers are confidential.)

How is that decision made?

8. What methods do you use to identify students' home language proficiency and their content knowledge in the home language?

Who is involved in this process?

9.
  - a. Can you describe what you do *in your classroom* to evaluate the English proficiency skills of the students with significant cognitive disabilities?
  - b. What kinds of formal or informal assessment techniques do you think give you the most accurate information about students' English proficiency?
10. If your state were to develop an alternate assessment of English proficiency, like the state English proficiency test ELs take each spring, but specifically for ELs with significant cognitive disabilities, what kind of assessment format would give the best information on what your students can do in English?

#### Teacher Background

11. How many years of professional experience do you have overall?

Years of professional experience in this school?

12. How many years have you taught ELs with significant cognitive disabilities?

13. If you are an English language teacher, what kinds of professional development have you gotten around special education students? If you are an special education teacher, what kinds of professional development have you gotten around EL students?" (Prompt: Show the teachers the options to let them select answers.)
- ☐ Formal professional development activities related to accessing the general curriculum
  - ☐ School based activities (staff meetings, teacher work groups, etc.) related to accessing the general curriculum.
  - ☐ Teacher to teacher activities (planning times, scheduled or unscheduled collaboration, etc.) related to accessing the general curriculum.
  - ☐ Technical assistance (from district or entity liaison, curriculum specialist, or outside consultant, etc.) related to accessing the general curriculum.
  - ☐ Receive no support.
  - ☐ Other:
14. What professional development opportunities have been most helpful to you?
15. Is there anything we have not talked about today that you think would help you teach your EL students with significant cognitive disabilities?
16. Any final comments or concerns?