

Assessing K-12 Multilingual Learners' Development of the Language for Reading



Multilingual learners in K-12 schools in the United States embark on a journey to develop the English language proficiency needed to access the academic content of the classroom. WIDA ACCESS is designed to annually measure the progress students make on that journey, and to provide one indication that students have reached a point in their English language development whereby they may participate fully in grade-level instruction without English language supports. WIDA has consistently recommended that multiple measures be used to support this important decision as to when students may be reclassified into the general education population, though ACCESS test scores play an important role in that decision for most students.

This Focus Bulletin highlights how the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, informs the design of ACCESS Reading passages and items and helps clarify the connections between the standards and the types of reading tasks multilingual learners encounter on the test.

The WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, guides the design of WIDA's English language proficiency (ELP) assessments, including the ACCESS Reading test. ACCESS Reading measures how well students use English to make meaning from texts by assessing skills such as connecting ideas across sentences, interpreting a variety of sentence structures, and navigating the academic vocabulary found in school texts. Because understanding written language is central to success in school, Reading domain scores contribute substantially (35%) to students' overall ACCESS scores.

Core Components of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework

The ACCESS Reading test is grounded in the **WIDA Standards Statements, Proficiency Level Descriptors** (PLDs), and **Key Language Uses** (KLUs)—core components that describe the language features students are expected to understand across grades K–12.

The Three Dimensions of Language

These features are organized into three dimensions of language that shape how students make sense of text:

- **Discourse-level features:** How ideas are organized and connected across sentences and paragraphs.
- **Sentence-level features:** Grammar, clause structures, and the ways sentences carry meaning.
- **Word/phrase-level features:** Words, phrases, expressions, and discipline-specific vocabulary which are the building blocks of academic language.

Overview

In this Focus Bulletin, we explain WIDA’s approach to assessing the language for reading on ACCESS and other WIDA ELP tests. Language for reading refers to the vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse patterns students use to make meaning from text. Using a series of sample reading passages and items, we illustrate how both the linguistic complexity of texts and the processing demands of questions increase across grade levels and proficiency levels. By understanding how multilingual learners’ reading skills are assessed on WIDA tests—and making explicit connections between the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition and the assessed reading skills—educators will be better equipped to interpret student test scores and understand student performance through proficiency level scores.

Expected Outcomes

This Focus Bulletin will help educators:

- Develop a clearer understanding of how multilingual learners’ language development is assessed in the Reading domain on WIDA tests.
- Make more explicit connections between the WIDA ELD Standards and the language development skills assessed on the ACCESS Reading domain test.
- Strengthen their ability to interpret student test scores, including how to use proficiency level scores to understand student performance.

What does the WIDA ACCESS Reading Test Measure?

The purpose of ACCESS Reading is to measure students' English language development for reading in English. After completing the test, students receive proficiency level (PL) scores, which connect their performance to the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition. The standards define six proficiency levels: Level 1 (Entering), Level 2 (Emerging), Level 3 (Developing), Level 4 (Expanding), Level 5 (Bridging), and Level 6 (Reaching). ACCESS Reading items draw on language use across the five WIDA ELD Standards Statements: Language for Social and Instructional Purposes, Language for Language Arts, Language for Mathematics, Language for Science, and Language for Social Studies. While reading passages may be situated in particular disciplines (math, social studies, etc.), the reading items measure language proficiency. The reading items are not designed to assess mastery of content standards. In other words, the reading items on WIDA ELP tests, including ACCESS, are intended to measure students' understanding of written language and not of content knowledge.

The reading construct measured on WIDA assessments is grounded in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, and it aligns closely with how researchers describe second-language reading development. Although ACCESS Reading is designed specifically to assess English language proficiency, its passages and items share many features with other reading assessments used for students who are learning English in academic settings. Research in second-language reading (e.g., Adlof et al., 2011; Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Jiang, 2013) highlights several skills that support the development of reading proficiency in English, and these strongly mirror the language expectations outlined in the 2020 Edition. These skills include

- Processing grammatical structures for meaning.
- Efficiently processing grammatical structures.
- Identifying main ideas in a text.
- Understanding how texts are organized and how genre patterns shape meaning.
- Reading with purpose to interpret meaning accurately.

In short, WIDA reading tests are designed to evaluate the language students need to read successfully in school, not their background knowledge or content expertise. While WIDA's approach has much in common with other assessments designed for multilingual learners, it differs from tests created for students reading in their first language, which typically assume a higher level of English proficiency and focus more on grade-level content standards. These differences will be explored later in this Focus Bulletin.

How does the WIDA ACCESS Reading Test Measure Learners' Reading Proficiency in English?

An important part of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, is the description of three dimensions of language (discourse, sentence, and word/phrase). These dimensions influence how reading passages on ACCESS are designed. As students move through the grade-level clusters and proficiency levels, the passages they encounter vary in **length, vocabulary, grammatical complexity, and how ideas are organized and connected**. In the early grades and at lower proficiency levels, texts tend to be short, familiar, and visually supported. As students progress to higher grades and proficiency levels, the passages become longer and more complex, shifting from single sentences to multi-paragraph texts that require readers to connect ideas both within and across sentences. The test items are designed to measure how well students understand the language in these passages, including their ability to interpret discipline-specific vocabulary within context, make sense of increasingly complex sentence structures, and follow the overall organization or flow of a text.

Sample ACCESS Reading Items and Commentary

Figure 1: Grade 1 Reading Item Targeting Lower Proficiency Levels

At the Store	
Alex buys a notebook. It has many sheets of paper to write on.	1 What does Alex buy?
	☐ 
	☐ 
	☐ 

This item is representative of developmentally appropriate reading items that appear on the WIDA ACCESS test for students in grade 1. The item is testing students' word-level knowledge in a familiar context, with graphic support. Answer choices are presented as images to minimize reading load outside of the language being assessed, as is appropriate for students who are beginning to develop their English language reading skills.

According to the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition PLDs for Grade 1, we expect multilingual learners to:

- Understand repeated words and phrases in familiar contexts and topics (Level 1).
- Understand frequently used words and phrases in familiar contexts and topics (Level 2).

These PLDs can help educators interpret students' ACCESS Reading scores. By reviewing the relevant grade-level cluster PLDs, educators can better understand what students' scores indicate about their language development for reading.

Research connection: Early gaps in English reading for multilingual learners often reflect additive bilingual development rather than deficits; many students attain proficiency in oral English within 3–5 years and academic English within 4–7 years (August & Shanahan, 2010; Halle et al., 2012; Winke & Zhang, 2019). Designing items with visual supports at these levels allows students to demonstrate what they can do in English without overloading them linguistically.

Instructional connections: Provide abundant exposure to repeated, high-utility words and phrases in familiar contexts. Pair print with visuals and gestures, and model think-alouds that connect pictures to words. Build routines that recycle language in morning messages and small-group reading.

Figure 2: Grade 1 Reading Item Targeting Intermediate Proficiency Levels

Petting Zoo	
Matt feeds the chickens. There are four chickens. Then three more chickens come to eat. Now there are seven chickens. 	1 Which number sentence shows this? ☐ $7 - 3 = 4$ ☐ $4 + 3 = 7$ ☐ $7 - 4 = 3$

Comparing the item in Figure 2 to the one in Figure 1 shows the progression of language expectations on the grade 1 ACCESS Reading test. In this “Petting Zoo” item, students need to process more language and to understand an increasing number of words and phrases, including related simple sentences. This item assesses the language for mathematics needed in first grade. Students do not need any prior content knowledge to answer this item; all necessary information is explicitly provided in the passage. However, they must understand the language in the text to determine the correct answer ($4 + 3 = 7$). Students in grade 1 performing at intermediate proficiency levels on ACCESS Reading can typically understand short sequences of related sentences and use that understanding to identify meaning in familiar, visually supported contexts.

Instructional connections: Use short sequences of related sentences and explicitly teach cohesive words (*first, then, next, because*). In math and science, explicitly teach key language (*less, fewer, more, plus, minus, equal to*) and allow students to talk through steps before reading, strengthening the oral-to-print bridge.

Figure 3: Grades 2–3 Reading Item Targeting Intermediate Proficiency Levels

Reading Night There are exactly 25 students in Ms. Olson’s class. Steven knows at least 30 people are coming to Family Reading Night. He wants to make sure there are a few extra chairs. Steven estimates that he should set up around 45 chairs in the school gym. 	1 How many chairs does Steven guess he should set up? ☐ Exactly 25 ☐ About 45 ☐ Close to 30
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The item in Figure 3 also demonstrates the progression of language expectations; in this case, across grade-level clusters. As with Figure 2, this “Reading Night” item targets intermediate levels of English reading proficiency in the context of mathematics, now in grades 2–3. According to the WIDA ELD Standards Framework PLDs for grade-level cluster 2–3, multilingual learners at Level 3 are expected to:

- Understand how coherent texts are crafted to meet a purpose across a series of extended sentences.

The theme for this passage—like all ACCESS Reading passages—comes from WIDA’s theme-generation process, in which practicing teachers contribute ideas for test content. Involving teachers in this early stage helps ensure that the topics and classroom situations reflected in ACCESS Reading passages are relevant to the content taught in the classroom at that grade-level cluster. Practicing teachers propose these themes, which are then developed into reading passages and test items by test developers before being reviewed again by educators for standards alignment, fairness, and content. You can read more about the test development process on the [Building a WIDA Assessment page](#) on the WIDA website.

In this particular passage and item, the language expectations for this grade band and proficiency level are evident in several ways. The passage requires learners to unpack expanded noun groups (e.g., *at least 30 people; a few extra chairs*), and the question incorporates a modal verb (*should*) and a phrasal verb (*set up*). Although these features are neither highly technical nor low-frequency, they illustrate the progression toward more sophisticated language use that is characteristic of intermediate proficiency in grades 2–3. Students whose ACCESS Reading scores reflect this level of proficiency are beginning to manage more complex sentence structures and language features, including expanded noun groups and common phrasal verbs, to construct meaning from text.

Instructional connections: Teach students to notice expanded noun groups and to paraphrase them (e.g., *at least 30 people* → *30 or more people*). Model how modal verbs (*should, might*) and common phrasal verbs (*set up, figure out*) change the meaning and tone of sentences.

Figure 4: Grades 9–12 Reading Item Targeting Intermediate Proficiency Levels

Clarence Birdseye	
Frozen Food Clarence Birdseye returned to the United States from Canada and designed a quick-freezing machine. Before the 1930s, some people did not want to buy frozen foods because they thought that freezing food reduced the quality. Birdseye's machine improved the flavor and texture of frozen foods. Soon, people wanted these improved frozen foods, and stores all over the United States began to offer foods that had not always been available before.	3 Which statement tells how Clarence Birdseye changed frozen food?
	☐ He reduced the availability.
	☐ He increased the quality.
	☐ He slowed the freezing process.
	☐ He designed a machine in Canada.

As seen in Figure 4, passages for secondary grade-level clusters are longer and denser, with cohesive devices connecting ideas (*before, because, soon, these, that*) and discipline-specific vocabulary (e.g., *frozen foods, freezing, flavor, texture*). The question targets the main idea developed across several sentences, not isolated words. Students in the 9–12 grade-level cluster performing at intermediate levels on ACCESS Reading can typically follow how ideas connect across sentences and identify central meanings in longer, more complex texts.

Research connection: In the secondary grade-level clusters, ACCESS Reading tends to reflect students' overall reading ability, so items focus on skills that strong readers consistently use—such as understanding vocabulary central to content and meaning making, following how ideas connect across sentences, keeping track of who or what pronouns refer to, and identifying the main point developed in a passage. At the same time, it's important to remember that students may still show uneven development in academic English. This means programs at these grade levels should continue providing clear, explicit instruction on cohesion, reference words, and other language features that help students organize and understand complex texts (Min et al., 2021; Winke & Zhang, 2019).

Instructional connections: Teach students to track referents (*this, that, these*; repeated/renamed nouns) and causal/temporal connectives (*because, therefore, before, after*). Provide quick-reference glossaries for discipline-specific terms while focusing on how language organizes ideas across the text.

Figure 5: Grades 9–12 Reading Item Targeting Higher Proficiency Levels

Plants and Light

Experiment 3:

A hormone called auxin, produced in the top part of the plant, is one of the things that causes plants to move toward light. Students conducted an experiment with four plants to investigate the relationship between covering parts of plants and plants' movements. All plants received light from a window. Students left Plant 1 uncovered to see what happens naturally. Plant 2 was covered on top and Plant 3 was covered at the base, each with a material that blocked light. Finally, Plant 4 was covered on top with a clear material that let light through.

Based on the data, students concluded that it is necessary for the part of the plant where auxin is made to be exposed to light in order for the plant to bend.

Plant number	Material	Results after 4 hours
1	None	Bends
2	Blocks light	Does not bend
3	Blocks light	Bends as much as Plant 1
4	Allows light	Bends as much as Plant 1

3 Based on the passage, what condition is necessary for a plant to bend?

☐ The plant hormone auxin must be absent.

☐ The base of the plant must be covered.

☐ The top of the plant must receive light.

☐ The part of the plant with auxin must be covered.

The item shown in Figure 5 reflects the higher proficiency reading levels on ACCESS. It assesses language for science and features discipline-specific organization and dense noun groups with embedded clauses. Correct responses indicate readiness to engage in general education coursework using academic English.

Research connection: As students move up in proficiency and grade level, ACCESS increasingly acts as a single, clear measure of their English reading ability. Still, the dense, discipline-specific language found in academic texts can be challenging. Designing effective items—and supporting classroom instruction—means making genre structures visible and helping students unpack and rebuild complex noun groups to strengthen both comprehension and academic writing (Min et al., 2021).

Instructional connection: Preview the organization of the discipline-specific genre (*explanation, argument, procedure*). Highlight compact noun groups with embedded clauses (e.g., *the part of the plant where auxin is made*); practice unpacking clauses, then repacking for concise writing.

How does ACCESS Reading Differ from English Language Arts (ELA) State Content Assessments?

Students who take WIDA ACCESS also take their state's ELA assessment, which is designed to measure how well they have mastered grade-level literacy standards, such as analyzing complex texts, writing for different purposes, and using evidence effectively. These ELA tests assume that students already have a solid foundation in English and can understand grade-level texts without additional language support. In other words, ELA assessments focus on what students *can do with grade-level content*, not on whether they have the English language needed to access that content.

ACCESS Reading, on the other hand, is designed specifically to measure **English language development**, not content knowledge. The tasks intentionally vary in linguistic complexity to reflect students' proficiency levels. This helps educators see how students are developing the vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse features needed to participate in academic learning. Because ACCESS measures developing English proficiency, students who are early in their English-learning journey may find state ELA tests challenging—the texts and tasks on those tests are written for students who are already quite proficient in English. Research on students in the WIDA Consortium (Winke & Zhang, 2019) shows that as students grow in English proficiency, their performance on ELA content assessments improves as well.

Research in second-language development also emphasizes the importance of explicitly teaching academic language—such as connectors, complex noun groups, and text structures—because these features often make grade-level texts difficult to understand (Fang & Schlepppegrell, 2008). ACCESS helps identify where students are along this developmental pathway, giving teachers clearer insight into the kinds of supports students may need as they work toward full access to grade-level ELA expectations.

In short

- ELA content assessments measure mastery of grade-level academic standards and presuppose that students can already handle the linguistic demands of grade-level texts.
- ACCESS measures students' English language development, with tasks intentionally designed to match their proficiency level and reveal what linguistic supports they still need.
- As students develop the English language they need to independently read grade-level texts, as indicated by their ACCESS Reading score, they become ready to meaningfully engage with and succeed on ELA reading assessments.
- The PLDs in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, help educators interpret ACCESS scores by describing what students can do with language for reading at each proficiency level.

Conclusion

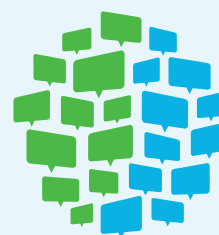
Understanding the distinct role of ACCESS Reading helps ensure that multilingual learners are evaluated in ways that honor their developmental journey with English. While state ELA assessments capture how students apply literacy skills to grade-level academic content, ACCESS provides a complementary lens—one that illuminates how students are growing in the specific language features that make academic reading possible.

By viewing ACCESS results through the lens of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition, educators gain clearer insight into the language demands students are ready to handle, and the types of support that will move them toward greater independence. This perspective encourages instruction that is not only rigorous but responsive, recognizing that language development is gradual, cumulative, and intertwined with meaningful engagement in classroom learning.

Ultimately, ACCESS Reading equips schools with information that helps shape more equitable learning environments. When educators interpret scores with an understanding of language development research and the purposes of the assessment, they are better positioned to set appropriate expectations, differentiate instruction, and celebrate the progress multilingual learners make each year. In this way, ACCESS serves as a tool for both measuring growth and guiding the instructional decisions that foster it.

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WIDA™

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

WIDA Authors

Mark Chapman
Fabiana MacMillan
Lynn Shafer Willner

Editing and Design

Rachele Stucker
Janet Trembley

School of Education

University of Wisconsin-Madison

1025 West Johnson St.
Madison, WI 53706

Client Services Center

Toll free: 866.276.7735
help@wida.wisc.edu

wida.wisc.edu

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