Designing Assessment Tasks for Kindergarten Multilingual Learners

Introduction

WIDA specializes in designing and developing language proficiency assessments for young multilingual learners (MLs). In 2025, WIDA released the new WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten assessment, following on from the release of WIDA Screener for Kindergarten in 2021. Both of these language proficiency tests, designed for kindergarten multilingual learners, feature similar approaches to test design with the aim of allowing these young students opportunities to show what they can do with their developing language skills. In this Focus Bulletin, we describe some of the design features common across WIDA kindergarten assessments, which include:

- Thematic cohesion of test content and items.
- Using task models to demonstrate how students respond.
- Using scaffolds to support student understanding.
- Stopping rules to help ensure that students are not presented with test content that is too difficult.

Before describing these key design features in more detail, we would also like to clarify what kindergarten students are **not** expected to do as they engage with these tests. Many students in kindergarten will not yet be ready to engage with a traditional standardized assessment or to interact with technology in an assessment context due to their stage of fine motor skill development. Therefore, these expectations are reflected in the test designs. Specifically, the students do not need to engage with technology as the tests are paper-based, nor do students need to use a marksheet to indicate their answers to questions. Students answer test items by pointing at pictures, speaking to a human test administrator, or handwriting on a piece of paper with a pencil.

WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition

The starting point for the redesigned WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten assessment was the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework, 2020 Edition. Test developers use both the Key Language Uses (KLUs) and the Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) prominently in the design of the new test. We write items that target specific proficiency levels and KLUs by design and aim to cover the PLDs and KLUs, as described in the 2020 Edition, across the entire assessment.

Figure 1: Distribution of Kindergarten Key Language Uses over 2020 Edition Standards

Distribution of Key Language Uses in Kindergarten				
WIDA ELD Standard	**Narrate**	**Inform**	**Explain**	**Argue**
1. Language for Social and Instructional Purposes	Most Prominent	Most Prominent	Most Prominent	Most Prominent
2. Language for Language Arts	Most Prominent	Most Prominent	Present	Prominent
3. Language for Mathematics	Present	Most Prominent	Prominent	Prominent
4. Language for Science	Present	Most Prominent	Most Prominent	Prominent
5. Language for Social Studies	Prominent	Most Prominent	Present	Prominent

Figure 2: Kindergarten Proficiency Level Descriptors from 2020 Edition

Grade K WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors for the Interpretive Communication Mode (Listening, Reading, and Viewing)

Toward the end of each proficiency level, when scaffolded appropriately, multilingual learners will…

Criteria	End of Level 1	End of Level 2	End of Level 3	End of Level 4	End of Level 5	Level 6
DISCOURSE Organization of language	Understand how coherent texts (spoken, written, multimodal) are created…					
	around topics (my family) with words, pictures, phrases, or chunks of language	around topics (all about me) with repetition, rhyming, and common language patterns	around topics (all about me) with repetition, rhyming, and other language patterns with short sentences	to meet a purpose (to inform, narrate, entertain) through multiple related sentences	to meet a purpose in a series of extended sentences	to meet a purpose in a short text
DISCOURSE Cohesion of language	Understand how ideas are connected across a whole text through…					
	patterned language with repetitive words	patterned language with repetitive words and phrases (This is a duck. The duck says quack, quack. This is a goat.)	repetitive words and phrases across a text (Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?)	some frequently used cohesive devices (demonstratives: this, these, that, those)	a few different types of cohesive devices (repetition, pronoun referencing, etc.)	multiple types of cohesive devices (synonyms, antonyms, repetition)
DISCOURSE Density of language	Understand how ideas are elaborated or condensed through…					
	labels with single nouns (ball, car)	frequently used single noun groups (my toys, my car, your ball)	frequently used multi-word noun groups (my favorite book)	multi-word noun groups with connectors (a shiny truck and a red ball)	expanded noun groups with classifiers (the red fire truck)	expanded noun groups with prepositional phrases (the red fire truck in the station)
SENTENCE Grammatical complexity	Understand how meanings are extended or enhanced through…					
	words, pictures, and phrases (Anna's chair)	words, pictures, phrases, and chunks of language (ran to her room)	chunks of language (sat in her chair, jumps on her bed)	simple sentences (She picked it up.)	related simple sentences (She picked it up. She carried it to her room.)	multiple related simple sentences (She picked it up. She carried it to her room. She opened it up.)
WORD, PHRASE Precision of language	Understand how precise meanings are created through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language through…					
	a few words and phrases in familiar contexts and topics (map, desk, hello)	repeated words and phrases in familiar contexts and topics (sound it out, think first)	frequently used words and phrases in familiar contexts (time to clean up)	situation-specific words and phrases (What sounds do we hear?)	an increasing number of words and phrases (We need four different colors to make a pattern.)	a growing number of words and phrases in a variety of contexts (special visitor, school assembly)

Design Principles for Kindergarten Multilingual Learners

The kindergarten multilingual learner population that WIDA serves is varied and typified by young students who are making rapid progress learning the English skills they need to succeed in the school context. These students enter kindergarten with very different language profiles, though they typically demonstrate higher levels of English oral language development compared with their literacy (reading and writing) skills. Many students are beginning their language learning trajectory in reading and writing at this age. Experience in early childhood education (ECE), or education that occurs before kindergarten is a key variable contributing to their language profiles (Gerde et al., 2015). Designing an appropriate and valid assessment for this highly varied student population who are making rapid progress with their language development is no simple task. Therefore, working from a clear and developmentally appropriate set of guiding design principles is important. These design principles help ensure that test content and test items are age-appropriate and accessible for students who are probably taking a standardized test for the first time (McKay, 2006; Nikilov, 2016).

1. Cohesion of test content and items

Both WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten (Kindergarten ACCESS) and WIDA Screener for Kindergarten (Kindergarten Screener) are designed around a single content theme. This approach to test design allows students to become familiar with the theme, which continues throughout the entire assessment, providing both the test input and test items in a consistent manner. This is important for young multilingual learners as the consistent theme reduces the number of cognitive shifts that students experience during the test (Papp, 2018).

Students are introduced to the test theme by listening to a short story read aloud by the test administrator at the beginning of the test. On Kindergarten ACCESS, the theme introduced in the storybook is that of building a community garden. This theme was proposed by a group of kindergarten educators as one possible theme for the assessment and was developed by experienced test developers who are themselves former kindergarten educators. In addition to the storybook providing a consistent theme for the assessment, reading an illustrated storybook together with a teacher is a familiar experience for kindergarten students and helps the test experience reflect what happens in the classroom. This design feature makes the task more meaningful and strengthens the validity of the assessment (Hauck et al., 2017).

Figure 3: WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten Storybook

Once the test administrator has finished reading the storybook with the student, the first test items are introduced to the student. For both Kindergarten Screener and Kindergarten ACCESS, the listening and speaking items are integrated, so students will experience a series of listening items related to the storybook content and will then respond to some speaking items. This flow of test content and item delivery continues throughout the integrated listening and speaking domain test, supporting a cohesive test experience for students.

2. Using task models to demonstrate how students respond

Task models provide important support for students as they progress through the assessment. Task models are designed to demonstrate to students what is expected of them before they respond to a scored test item (Hauck et al., 2017; Rixon, 2018). In a task model, the test administrator will show a student how to respond to a test task before the student is expected to respond. Let's look at an example from a listening item.

In this example, the test administrator asks the student to practice pointing to the correct part of the picture to indicate understanding of the question (Let's point to a butterfly.). By working through this example together, the test administrator can check whether the student understands how to respond before proceeding to a scored test

Figure 4: WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten Listening Item

There are butterflies in the picture. Let's point to a butterfly.
Allow time for the student to respond (OR) point to a butterfly and say: **Here's a butterfly!**
If necessary:
• **Do you understand what to do?** Model the task again if necessary.
Offer praise and encouragement.

item. This design feature provides students with appropriate support right at the time they need it, just before having to respond to a test item that will contribute to their score. As you can see in this example, the task model is reinforced with a question checking the student's understanding and the option to repeat the task model if needed, though this repetition is optional. Task modeling is an important design feature that is incorporated across WIDA kindergarten assessments.

3. Using scaffolds to support student understanding

Scaffolds are used in both language teaching and language assessment to help students successfully complete a task. There are many different types of scaffolds (e.g., Gibbons, 2014; Walqui, 2006) designed to help students and include:

Verbal scaffolds
- Additional prompting, model speaking and writing responses, etc.

Instructional scaffolds
- Lined paper, graphic organizers, visuals, manipulatives, etc.

Procedural scaffolds
- Model listening and reading tasks, oral response before writing, drawing before writing, etc.

Scaffolding can be very helpful in assessment contexts (Wolf et al., 2016). Instructional scaffolds (e.g., sentence frames) are helpful for young multilingual learners in content assessments (Kang et al., 2014). Procedural scaffolds (e.g., retelling) are helpful in standardized assessments for young learners (Choi et al., 2019). However, not all scaffolding is equally helpful. Instructional scaffolds (e.g., visuals) can be more helpful than procedural (retelling) for young MLs in some cases (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002; Méndez et al., 2018).

Providing the appropriate type and degree of scaffolding is challenging so WIDA has carefully researched the scaffolding that best supports students in an assessment context for kindergarten multilingual learners. Scaffolds are employed across WIDA kindergarten assessments, and the writing domain tests feature a variety of scaffolds intended to support students in showing what they can do with their emerging writing skills. For example, on the writing domain test of Kindergarten ACCESS, students are first asked to draw a picture before engaging in any textual writing. Students are given this opportunity to draw to indicate a major transition in the assessment—that they are now communicating in English via making marks on paper. Drawing is an activity familiar to these young learners and eases them into the writing domain before requiring them to produce letters or words. Pedagogically, this mirrors sociocultural approaches to writing development, where children communicate verbally with adults about drawings and symbols on paper as a way to make connections between their oral and literacy skills when generating and producing ideas (Gerde & Bingham, 2025).

After students have progressed through the drawing activity on the writing domain test, other scaffolds are employed to support students in their production of written language. Graphic supports, line guides, and sentence starters all feature on the WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten writing domain test. For example, in Figure 5 we can note the use of graphic support, a procedural scaffold (Say "bag." Now write the word "bag" here.), and an optional verbal scaffold (What sounds do you hear in the word "bag"?).

Figure 5: Scaffolds in WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten Writing Item

WIDA, together with our partners at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), has conducted research into the appropriate amount and type of scaffolding to best support kindergarten multilingual learners. It has shown a complex interplay between student affect and performance. Providing too many scaffolds, while reassuring for some test administrators, can become confusing for students and lead to the test taking longer than necessary. There is a sweet spot for the right amount of scaffolding to support student engagement and performance beyond which the scaffolds may have unintended negative consequences. Graphic supports can be particularly challenging to get right. Graphics that are too complex can be distracting rather than supporting for students and may be especially problematic for students with low vision (Christensen et al., 2023). However, graphics that are too simple may be ineffective and even confusing. The right balance for graphic supports and other scaffolds is established by getting input from kindergarten educators during test development, trialing the graphics, and observing student interaction and performance, followed by interviews with students and test administrators. Observations and interviews that include students and test administrators with and without low vision can reveal which scaffolds students and test administrators perceive as helpful and which ones need revision to provide the intended support (Christensen et al., 2023)

4. Stopping rules to help ensure that students do not engage with test content that is too difficult

All WIDA kindergarten assessments feature the use of stopping rules, which are intended to prevent students from moving on to items that are clearly beyond their current language proficiency level. This is important because asking students to engage with test items that are too difficult could be potentially frustrating or upsetting for these young learners. The stopping rules require test administrators to keep track of student scores within a test domain and carefully follow instructions within the test materials. For example, the test administrator calculates the number of items a student got correct, and follows the stopping rule to determine whether the student may continue to respond to more listening items or whether the listening test will be stopped.

Figure 6: Stopping Rule in Score Sheet

Moving on (fill in only one bubble)	
If Listening Correct (L1) is 0:	Otherwise:
🛑 Stop here: ⬭	➡️ Move on: ⬭
Go to W1 on page 7 in the Score Sheet.	Go to LS2 in the Score Sheet.

Writing Task Design

The Writing domain test on WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten is made up of a total of eight items. The very first item encourages students to sketch themselves before being asked to write their name. This drawing task is intended as a warm-up for kindergarten students as they transition from the Listening and Speaking domains to the Writing domain. The drawing task is not scored and does not contribute to students' performance on the test.

Following the name writing item, which is scored, there are two item sets (each set is made up of three related items) at each of the first two proficiency levels (PLs). The aim of organizing items into item sets that are similar in both format and content is to reduce the cognitive load required for the student to reorient to a new topic or switch their attention between different sources of information for each item (Field, 2018a). Additionally, having multiple items at each PL gives students several opportunities to show what they can do at that PL before the determination is made to go on to the next PL or stop the administration of that domain test. These writing items that target PL 1 and 2 give students the opportunity to write at the word level and then to produce connected words, based on the 2020 Edition Kindergarten PLDs. The final item in the Writing test is an extended writing task targeting PLs 3, 4, and 5, where students can show their ability to produce their writing skills at or beyond the sentence level.

Writing items on the redesigned Kindergarten ACCESS feature some important changes from the previous version of the assessment, including:

- New writing task types that may include a word bank or a printed sentence starter, reflective of kindergarten classroom practices
- Defined writing lines for students to write on (rather than blank boxes)
- Revised expectations for expressive communication based on alignment with the Kindergarten WIDA PLDs for the Expressive Communication Mode in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework, 2020 Edition

At the onset of a writing item, an orientation statement and corresponding graphics present in the Kindergarten Response Booklet (where students write) are introduced to establish the context of the items the student will respond to. The stimulus and prompting for each writing item are delivered by the TA based on the scripting present in the Kindergarten Test Administrator Script. Writing prompts may be repeated or re-modeled as many times as is needed to ensure students are focused and fully understand what they are being asked to do.

Figure 7: Sentence Starter and Defined Writing Lines in WIDA ACCESS for Kindergarten Student Writing Response Booklet
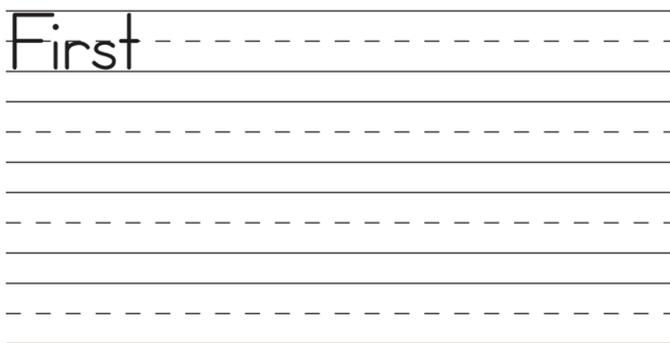
For all writing items, the students' attention is directed to the corresponding Kindergarten Response Booklet pages where they will produce their written response on pre-printed writing lines. If a student responds verbally, the TA is instructed to encourage the student to write their verbal response down.

For the PL 3/4/5 extended writing task, after the student is finished writing, the TA asks the student to read aloud what they wrote. The TA writes down (transcribes) what the student says they wrote in a "Transcription Box" that is present on the Kindergarten Score Sheet. This transcription is intended to aid in scoring the written student response after the test administration is complete.

Importance of a Supportive Test Administrator

As we have described in this Focus Bulletin, WIDA kindergarten assessments utilize a variety of strategies to help support students as they take the test. While we believe that these strategies are important in making the test a valid and reliable evaluation of kindergarten multilingual learners' language development, another element of the student test experience is at least as important as the test design: the role of the test administrator. The TA sits with the student throughout the assessment to facilitate a two-way interaction assessment format (Field, 2018b) that both guides and supports the student. Given that emotions are co-created and shared within social contexts (Butler, 2017), the benefits to the student of a positive, encouraging, and responsive test administrator are hard to overstate. While it is important for test administrators to follow the script and ensure that students experience a standardized experience, positive affect can be just as important as any of the assessments' design features in helping students show what they can do (Butler, 2017).

As we develop assessments for kindergarten multilingual learners, we work with experienced kindergarten educators as test administrators at several stages throughout the test development process. Observing these experienced educators administer the new assessment allows WIDA to learn valuable lessons as we see the techniques they employ as they work with their students. These techniques include:

- Welcoming the student at the start of the test and quickly establishing a warm and positive relationship with the student.
- Monitoring students' attention and focus as they navigate through the test.
- Redirecting students when they lose focus or disengage with the test content.
- Offering students a short break to stretch or get water when needed.
- Encouraging reluctant or tentative students to respond to test items via the use of 'if necessary' questions in the script.
- Giving students the time they need to respond to test tasks.
- Winding down the test in a positive way when students have reached the limits of their language proficiency.

WIDA recognizes and is grateful to all the kindergarten educators who administer our assessments. We also greatly appreciate all the educators who worked with WIDA and CAL as we developed the new Kindergarten ACCESS. Without these amazing educators, we would not have been able to develop the English language proficiency tests that we believe contribute to valid and reliable assessment of kindergarten multilingual learners.
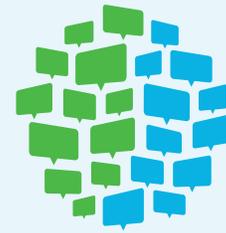
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