WIDA™

Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Before and Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prepared by Narek Sahakyan and H. Gary Cook
Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Wisconsin Center for
Education Research
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

WIDA

> This report examines English learners' testing, proficiency, and growth during the three most recent academic years, in order to shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Els' educational outcomes.

WIDA Research

WIDA advances academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are linguistically diverse through high quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators.

The overarching goal of research at WIDA is to promote educational equity and academic achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

To achieve this goal, we work in partnership with districts, states, and national experts to conduct research focused on understanding and explaining the educational experiences and outcomes of language learners. Through our research, we also aim to inform the decision-making needs of educators and policymakers who serve these children and youth.

The WIDA research team is housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER). Located at the highly ranked School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, WCER is one of the first and most productive education research centers in the world.

Contents

Figures and Tables

Introduction

This report examines English learners' (EL) testing, proficiency, and growth in the academic years of 2018–19, 2019–20, and 2020–21, using population-level data from ACCESS for ELLs Online (hereafter referred to as ACCESS), administered across the WIDA Consortium to students identified as ELs. The objective of the report is to shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ELs' educational outcomes. To this end, the presented data and figures measure ELs' performance on ACCESS before and after the pandemic forced the closure of schools, comparing ELs' testing, proficiency, and growth results in the academic years 2018–19 and 2019–20 (hereafter referred to as 2019 and 2020, respectively) to that of academic year 2020–21 (hereafter referred to as 2021).

The report is organized into three sections. First, we present the overall number of tested EL students in the 3 years from 2019 to 2021. We take a closer look at the profile of the tested students across the years for the demographic variables that WIDA collects (presented in Appendix A). The second part of the report focuses on EL proficiency and compares EL students' average composite scale scores across years by grade (for grades 1–12), both for overall composite and by individual domain (Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing).

The final part of the report examines EL growth, using average scale score gains across academic years for the growth cycles 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, presented by grade, both for overall composite and by individual domain. We also present a view of EL growth by grade-level cluster, broken down by overall composite and individual domain, and provide a summary to conclude. The data presented in the figures is given in tables in Appendix B.

English Learner Testing

Fewer ELs were tested online in 2021 compared to 2019 and 2020.[1] Overall, the number of students tested online in the 2021 sample was about 30% lower compared to previous years. Figure 1 presents the number of tested ELs by grade, across the three years.

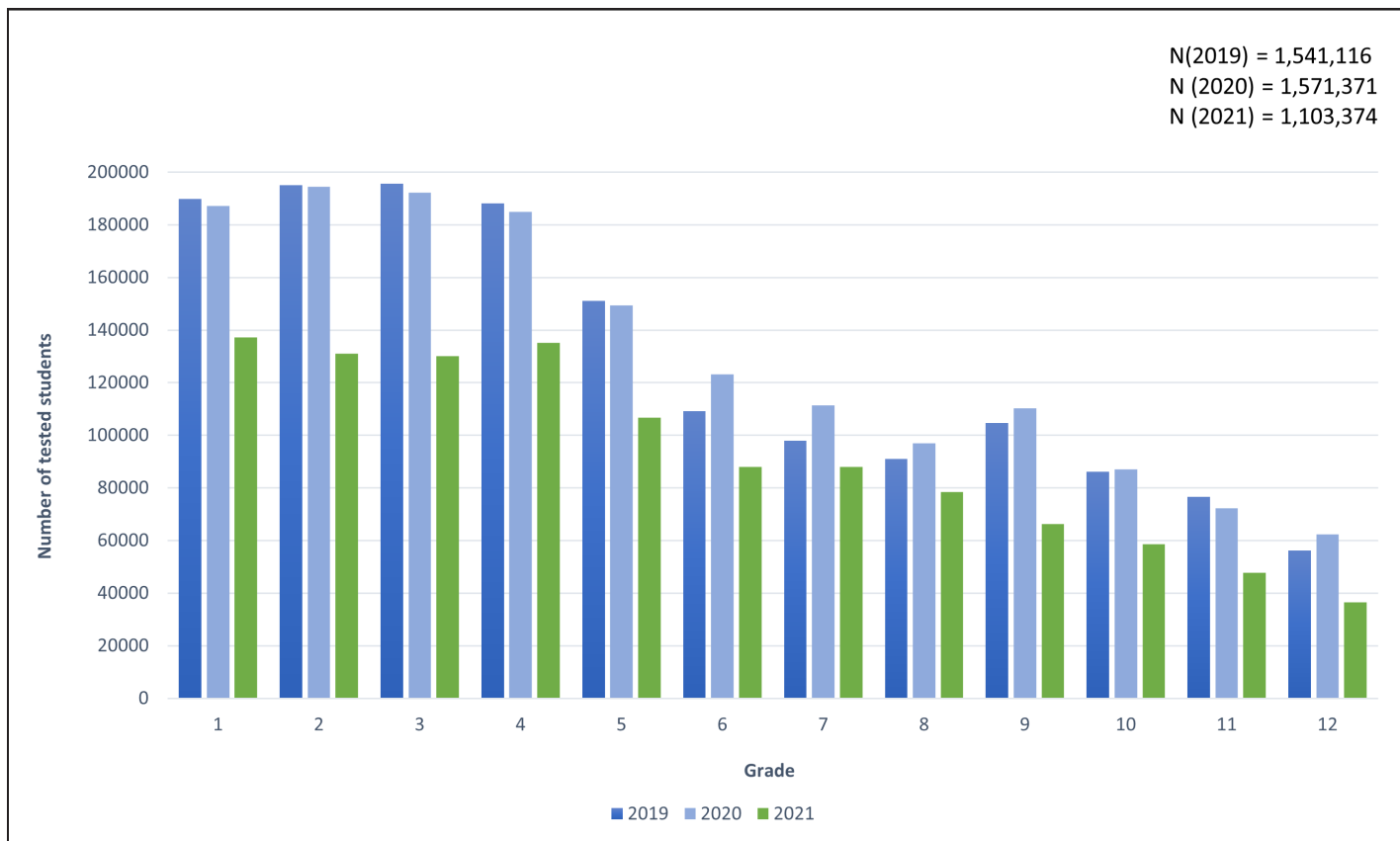**Figure 1: Number of ELs tested online by grade**

Figure 1 shows that the number of tested students declined in all grades. Elementary grades (grades 1–5) and high school grades (grades 9–12) had larger proportions of "missing" students compared to middle school grades (grades 6–8). With a decline of about 30% in the number of tested students in the 2021 sample compared to the previous 2 years, it is important to examine the demographic composition of the tested population. Appendix A presents proportions of tested students for the demographic variables that WIDA collects during the administration of ACCESS. Importantly, WIDA does not collect data on students' socioeconomic status, which has been shown to affect educational outcomes. To ensure a consistent and fair year-to-year comparison of average EL proficiency and growth, states and districts should examine the demographic makeup of students tested in their locale and consider the ELs who did not get the opportunity to take the assessment.

---

1 The data includes only those students who completed all four domains of ACCESS (for overall composite scale score calculations). The 2021 sample is based on student testing as of September 7, 2021.

English Learner Proficiency

Figure 2 presents average EL proficiency by grade. In this and the following figures EL proficiency is measured by overall composite scale scores, averaged across the entire population of students by test-takers' grade, for each of the three years the test was taken.[2]

Figure 2: EL proficiency by grade

OVERALL COMPOSITE

N (2019) = 1,541,116
N (2020) = 1,571,371
N (2021) = 1,103,374

Grade	2019	2020	2021
1	279	276	271
2	303	303	298
3	321	322	316
4	350	350	344
5	357	355	349
6	340	340	336
7	344	344	344
8	349	348	349
9	356	351	359
10	364	361	361
11	370	368	367
12	370	369	369
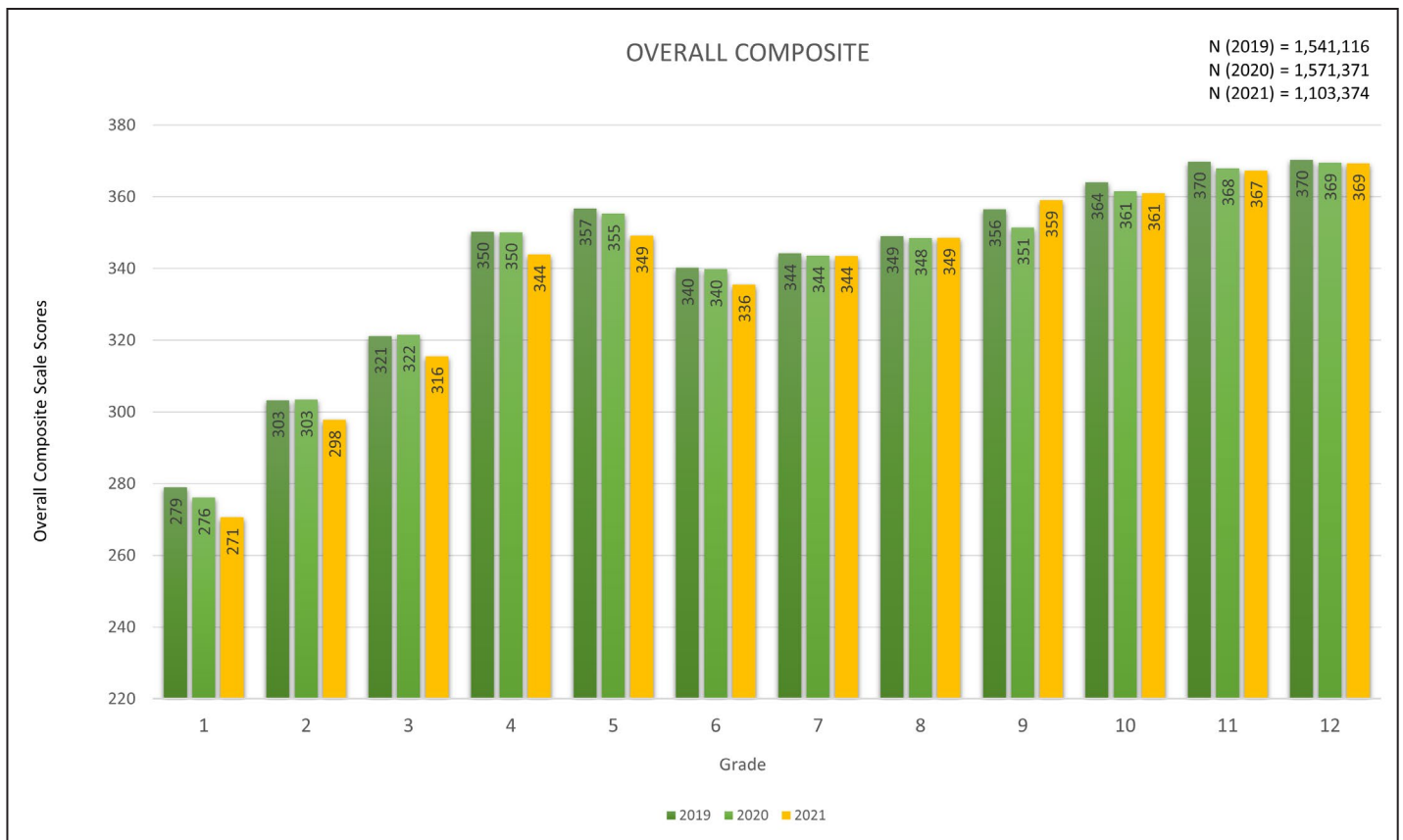
The green bars measuring average English learner proficiency on ACCESS in 2019 and 2020 for each of the 12 grades show that average EL proficiency was rather consistent prior to 2021. However, in 2021 EL proficiency trended lower for most grades (yellow bars) compared to the previous years. Compared to the previous year, EL proficiency was on average six overall composite scale score points lower in elementary grades 1–5, and four overall composite scale score points lower in grade 6, in 2021. With the exception of grade 9, EL proficiency was not different compared to the previous years in grades 7–12. Next, in Figure 3, we examine EL proficiency in the individual domains of Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing in each of the 12 grades.

---

2 While EL proficiency on ACCESS can also be measured by composite proficiency levels (ranging from 1.0 to 6.0), the vertical scaling of scale scores allows for a more accurate comparison of across-grade student performance. Further, scale scores are more granular (ranging from 300 to 600), and thus enable a more precise identification of trends and differences in graphical analyses.

Figure 3: EL proficiency in individual domains

Proficiency in Reading decreased slightly in some elementary and middle school grades, while it increased slightly in first grade and in grade 9-12. Proficiency in Speaking decreased in the elementary and middle school grades and remained about the same in high school. Proficiency in Listening decreased in grades 1–5 and slightly increased in grades 6–12. Proficiency in Writing decreased in all grades, with the larger relative decline in average scale scores in the lower grades (grades 1–6).

While scale scores are not strictly comparable across language domains, a comparison of 2021 scale scores in individual domains in 2021 to those of 2019 and 2020 shows that Writing, followed by Speaking, were the domains with relatively larger decreases in average scale scores. Similar to patterns revealed in Figure 2, the decline in average proficiency was more substantial in the lower grades in all of the four domains.

In the next section we provide a similar by-grade and by-domain breakdown of average EL performance with respect to their annual growth.

English Learner Growth

We measure EL growth by calculating ELs' average annual scale score gains, in the overall composite and individual domains, within each of the twelve grades. This requires matching individual students across two adjacent years: in 2019 and 2020 for calculating the (by-grade average) 2020 growth, and in 2020 and 2021, for calculating 2021 growth. Therefore, the unrestricted and unmatched sample that underlies the EL proficiency results in the previous section is somewhat different from the matched-across-adjacent-years sample that is used to examine EL growth below.[3]

Figure 4: EL growth by grade
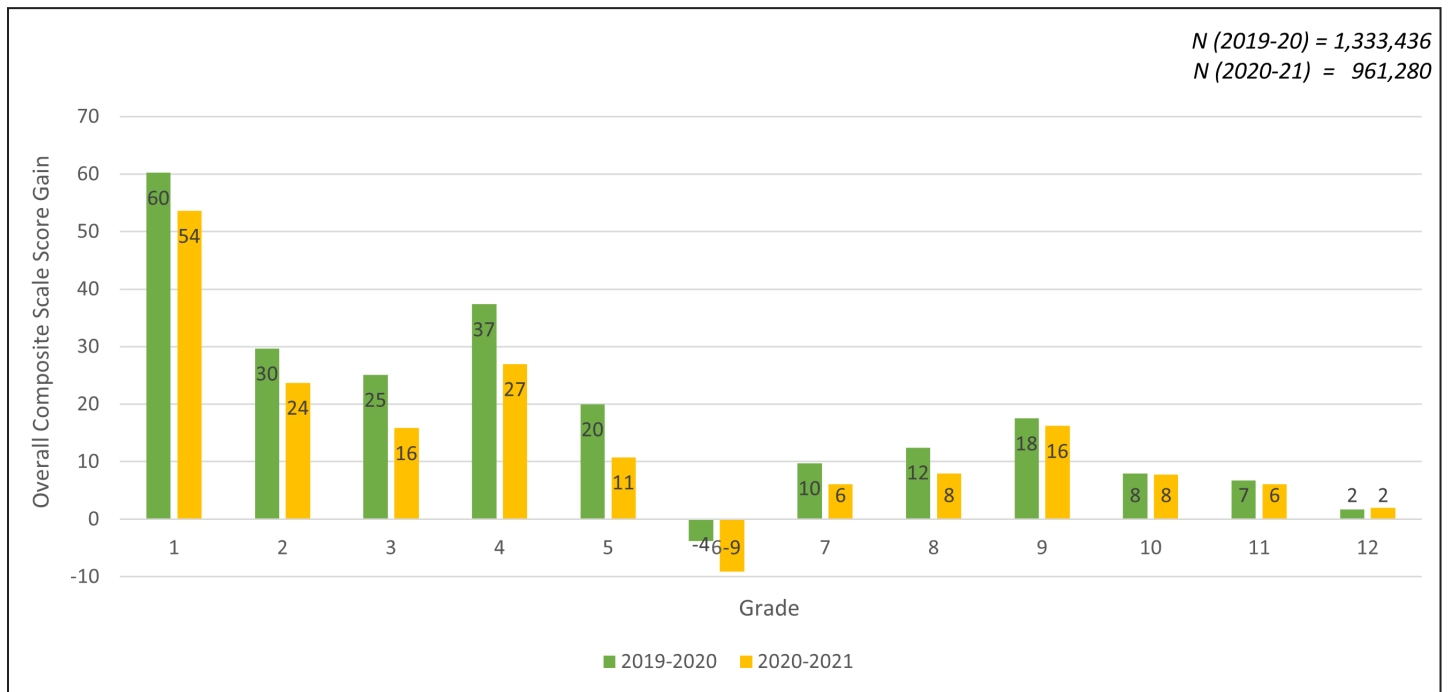
English learners' growth, as measured in overall composite scale score gains across adjacent years, decreased compared to that in the previous year. Achieving high growth was especially difficult for English learners in elementary and middle school grades, while the average gains made in the high school grades were similar to the growth recorded in the previous year. The negative average growth reported in the transition from fifth to sixth grade is troubling, especially since it had doubled in 2020-2021 to -9 scale score points.[4] Next, in Figure 5, we present EL growth in each of the four individual domains by grade.

---

3 Similar to EL proficiency calculations, EL growth results include only those students who received an overall composite scale score on ACCESS.

4 A combination of factors could contribute to the negative growth recorded in grade 6. First, the transition from elementary to middle school can be difficult for many students, especially those that are still learning English. Second, because of the clustered structure of the ACCESS test (K, 1-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12), some discontinuities in student growth in grades 1, 3, 6 and 9 may be expected (observed in grades 1, 6 and 9). Third, by fifth grade many EL students who started in kindergarten reach reclassification-level proficiency and exit EL status (a large proportion of ELs starts in K). This would imply that the 5th grade sample includes proportionally fewer "higher ability" students, which, in turn could cause the negative growth that we observe in the transition to the 6th grade.

Figure 5: EL growth in individual domains
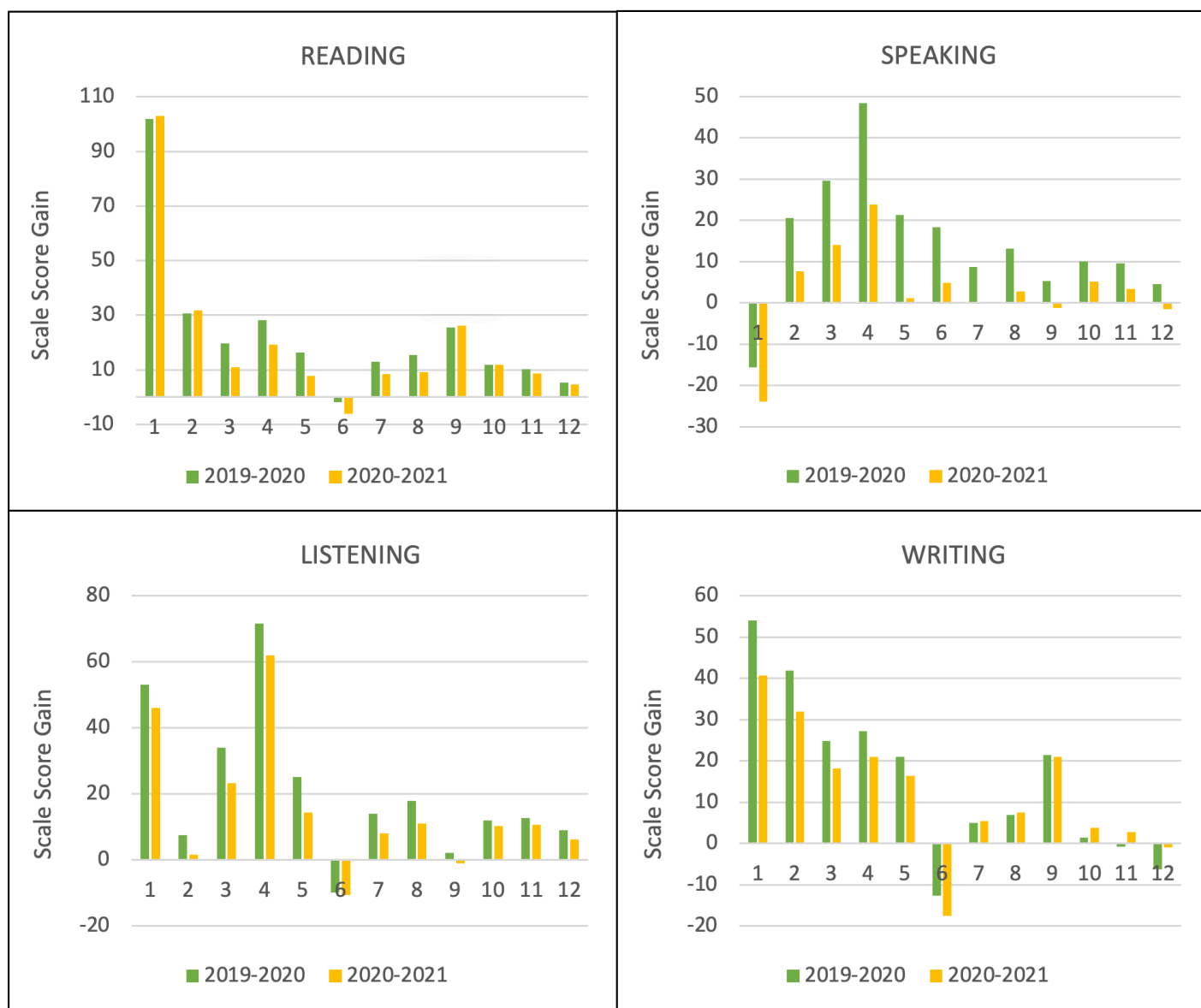
Examining EL growth by individual domain and grade reveals some interesting patterns. First, the small differences in the blue and orange bars for the average growth in the Reading domain for most grades imply that ELs' growth in Reading has not been substantially affected by the pandemic. While growth in Reading was slightly lower (compared to the previous year) in grades 3–8, it was about the same in grades 1–2 and grades 9–12. EL growth was slightly lower in all grades in 2020–2021 compared to that in 2019–2020 in the Listening domain. Similar trends can be observed in the Writing domain, where most of the decline in growth was in earlier grades, while there was some improvement in the (small) average growth made by ELs in high school grades.

Growth in Speaking, on the other hand, was substantially lower in all grades. It is quite troubling that after 2020 very little growth was recorded in Speaking in grades 5–12 (under 5 scale score points, on average), while the negative growth recorded from kindergarten to first grade nearly doubled in 2020–2021.[5] Interestingly, despite the negative average growth in overall composite gains, Speaking was the only domain where sixth grade ELs exhibited positive growth. Overall, the patterns revealed in Figure 5 show that while average EL growth has been affected in almost all domains and grades, the larger relative declines were recorded in the lower grades, and in the domain of Speaking.

Next, in Figures 6 and 7, we examine EL growth by grade-level cluster. In these figures, instead of averaging the scale score gains in the overall composite and individual domains within each grade, scale score gains are averaged within grade-level clusters (1–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12).

Figure 6: EL growth by grade-level cluster
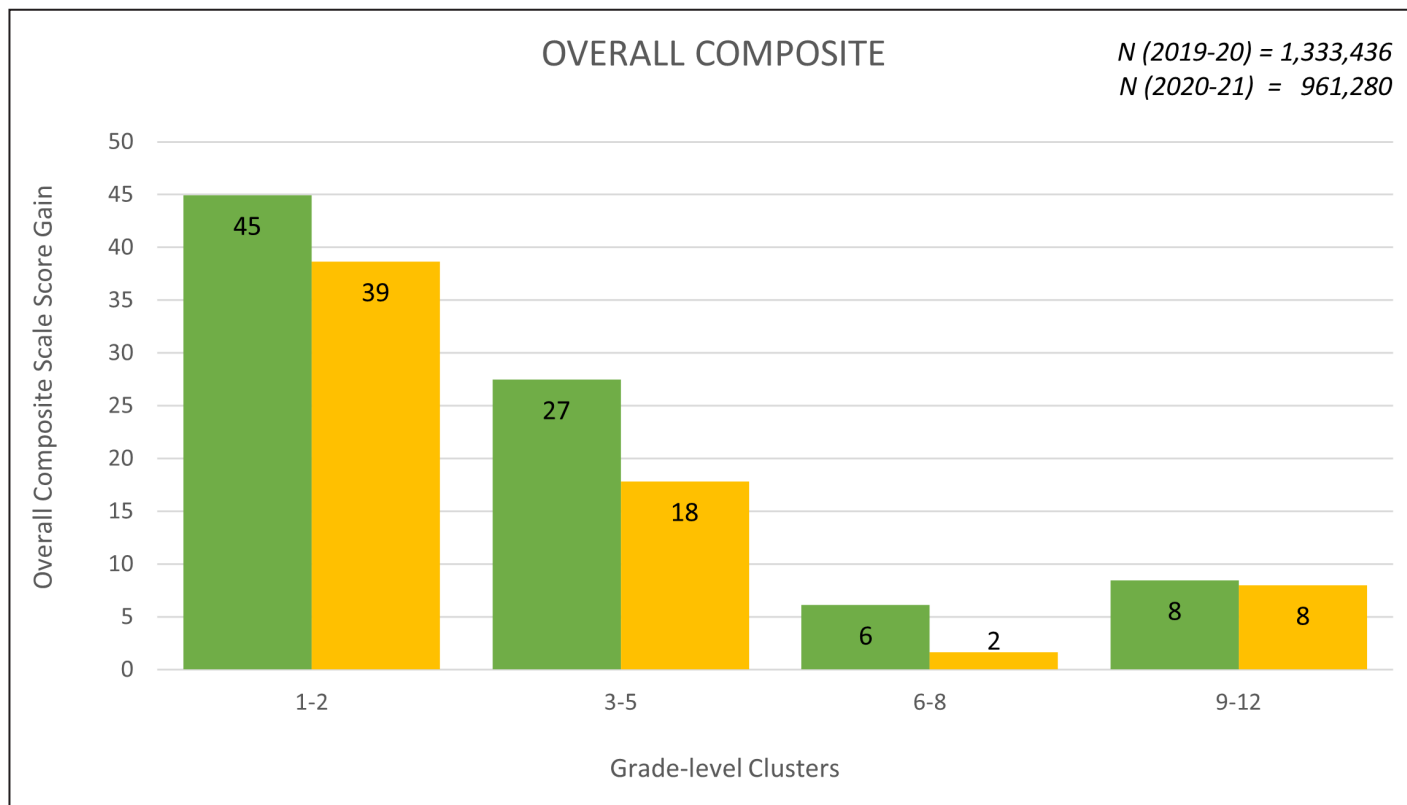
Figure 6 shows that achieving growth was most challenging for the middle school grade-level cluster. After 2020, EL growth declined by six scale score points in the 1–2 grade-level cluster, and by nine scale score points in the 3–5 grade-level cluster. The largest relative decline (67%) was in the 6–8 grade-level cluster, where average growth dropped from 6 scale score points to 2 scale score points. Next, Figure 7 shows average EL growth by individual domain.

---

5 The large difference in students' average kindergarten and first grade speaking scores could be due to the kindergarten Speaking test being a paper test scored locally, while the first grade test is administered online and is scored centrally.

Figure 7: EL growth by individual domain and grade-level cluster
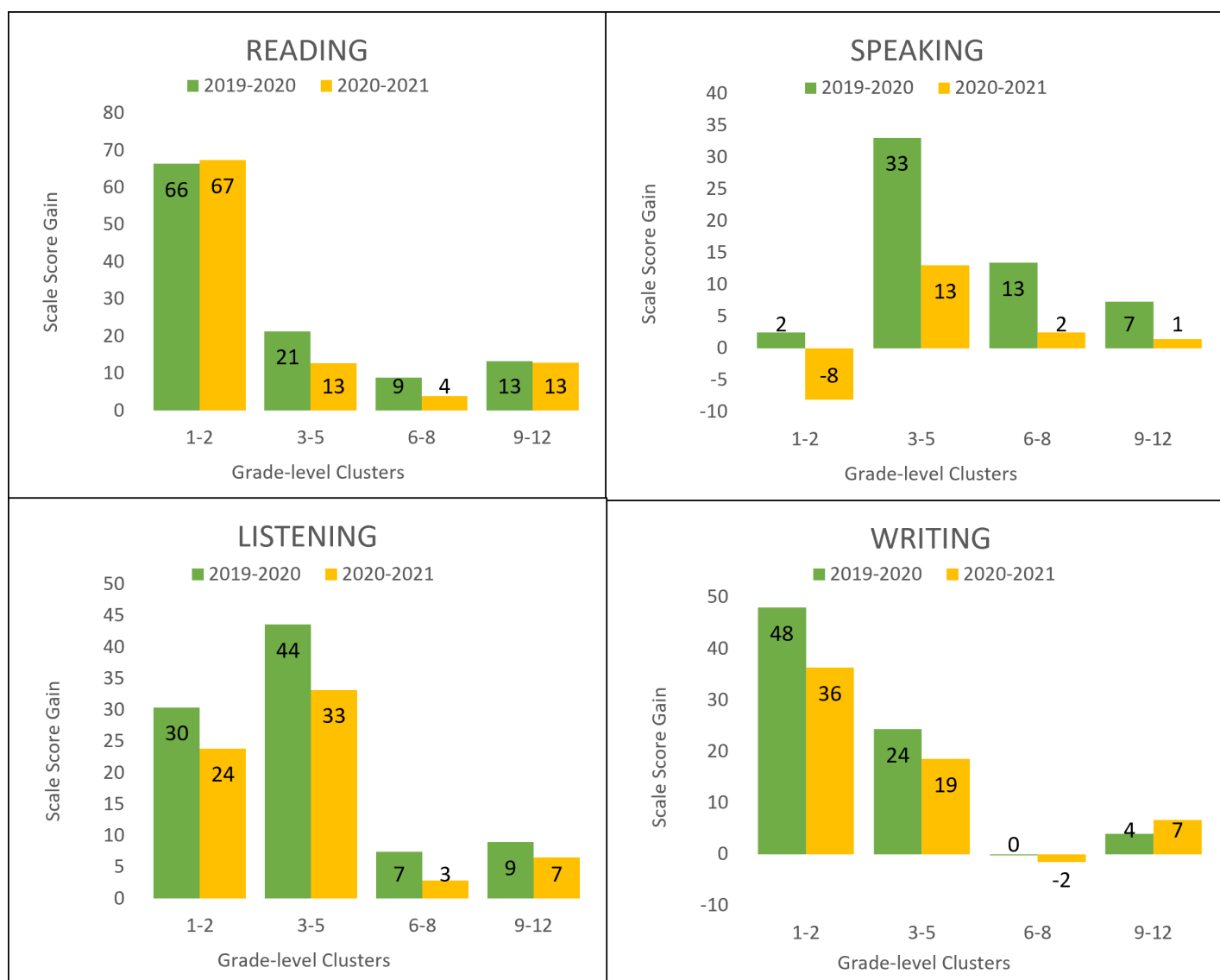
Differences in average growth recorded by ELs in the Reading domain across the two growth cycles reveal that the pandemic has not substantially affected the elementary and high school grade-level clusters. Growth in Listening declined in all grade-level clusters, with the 3–5 grade-level cluster reporting the largest drop (11 scale score points) in average growth between the two growth cycles. Growth in Writing declined in the 1–2 and 3–5 grade-level clusters, while it remained about the same and increased slightly in the 6–8 and 9–12 grade-level clusters.

Mirroring the findings from the by-grade and by-domain examination of student growth in Figure 5, Speaking was the domain where there were relatively larger declines in average EL growth. While there was relatively little growth in Speaking in the 1–2, 6–8, and 9–12 grade-clusters even prior to the pandemic, after 2020 growth in Speaking declined further and was negative in the 1–2 grade-level cluster, and close to zero in the 6–8 and 9–12 grade-level clusters.[6]

---

6 The negative growth in Speaking of the 1-2 grade-level cluster is due to the large negative growth recorded by the first grade-cohort, as explored further in footnote 5.

Summary

This report examines English Learners' testing, proficiency, and growth in the academic years of 2018–19, 2019–20, and 2020–21, using population-level data from ACCESS for ELLS Online, administered across the WIDA Consortium to students identified as ELs. The data reveals an overall downward trend in student proficiency and growth in 2021, as compared to 2019 and 2020. The impact of the pandemic on ELs' test scores varied by grade and domain, with the relatively larger declines recorded in elementary and middle school grades (first and sixth grades), and in the domain of Speaking.

Several factors should be considered when comparing aggregated and averaged test scores across years. First, for many EL students, the 2020–21 administration of the ACCESS for ELLs assessment was implemented under vastly different circumstances compared to past years. In addition to contextual and varied individual testing circumstances that affected student testing and performance, in response to challenges brought about by the pandemic, several WIDA Consortium member states and districts substantially shifted and extended their assessment administration windows, resulting in many students being tested at irregular times (e.g., 9 to 15 months apart, instead of 12 months apart). Therefore, students who tested in states and districts that administered ACCESS earlier than usual had a shorter time available for instruction and learning and would tend to show lower proficiency and growth.[7] Indeed, we observed higher proficiency and growth among students that tested into the end of the summer.

Further, when examining and comparing aggregate student data, it is important to consider those students who were not tested in 2020–21 due to factors caused by the pandemic. Compared to the previous years, the 2020–21 sample recorded about a 30% decline in the number of tested ELs across the WIDA Consortium. While there are still some WIDA states in testing (for 2020–2021 school year) into October of 2021, many ELs did not participate in ACCESS testing in 2021. Therefore, for states, districts, and schools examining their students' average proficiency and growth across years, it is imperative to consider any substantial differences in the profile (sample characteristics) of their tested students, as the pandemic has affected the educational opportunities and academic outcomes of EL students disproportionately.

---

7 Moreover, some WIDA Consortium member states and districts adjusted their testing policies, placing a higher priority on the testing of their higher proficiency ELs, to avoid missing important decisions regarding potential student reclassification.

Appendix A: Demographic Profiles

WIDA collects demographic data for students who take ACCESS for ELLs, though individual WIDA Consortium member states may limit what data they collect. Demographic categories are as follows:

- Hispanic/Latino
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black/African American
- Pacific Islander/Hawaiian
- White
- Male
- Female
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP) status

Figure A1 : Demographic profile of tested students

Proportions of tested students

N (2019) = 1,541,116
N (2020) = 1,571,371
N (2021) = 1,103,374
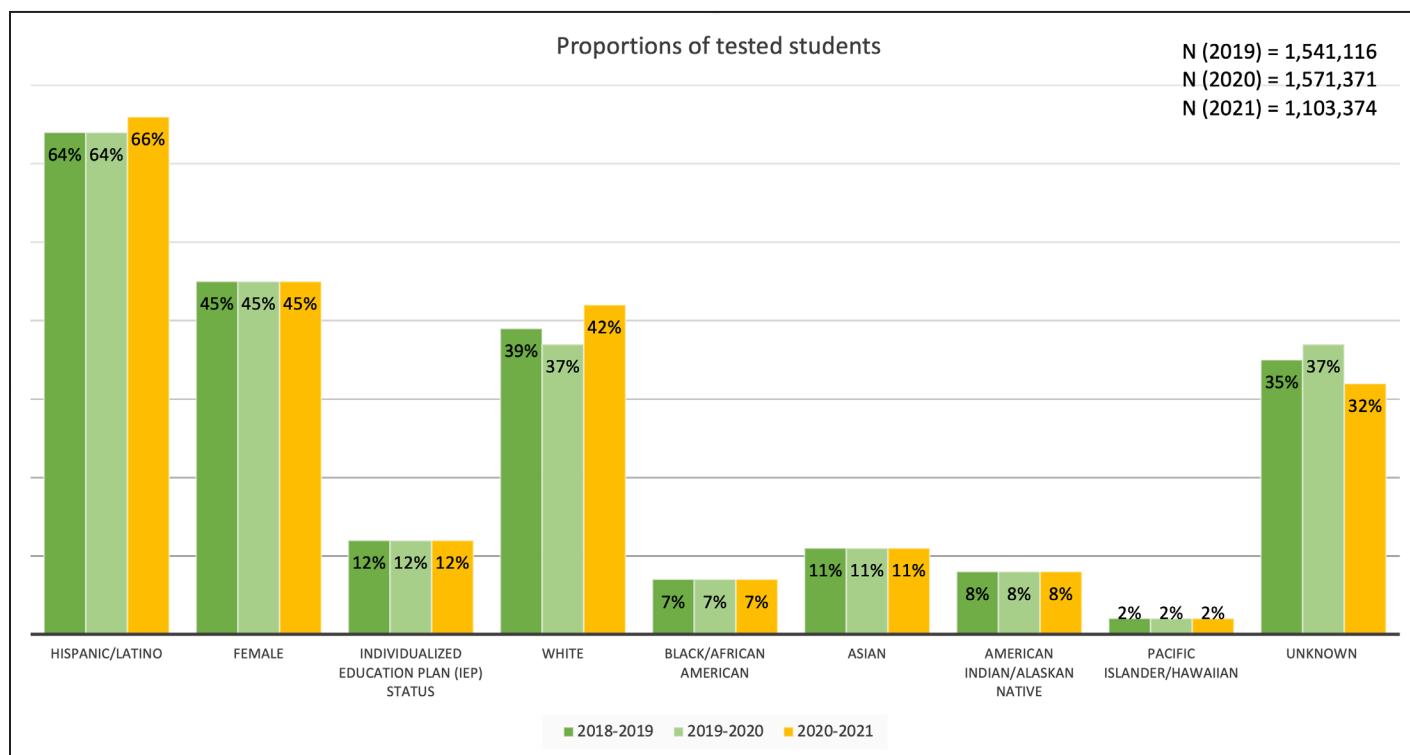
Appendix B: Data and Tables[8]

Table B1: Number of ELs tested online by grade

Grade/Year	Number of tested students		
	2019	2020	2021
1	189,843	187,178	137,144
2	195,089	194,459	131,013
3	195,621	192,231	130,168
4	188,171	184,853	135,071
5	151,077	149,279	106,632
6	109,060	123,223	87,998
7	97,878	111,342	87,971
8	90,898	97,000	78,501
9	104,676	110,210	66,162
10	86,166	87,107	58,584
11	76,554	72,243	47,644
12	56,083	62,246	36,486
TOTAL	1,541,116	1,571,371	1,103,374

Table B2: EL proficiency by grade (overall composite)

Grade/Year	EL Proficiency (overall composite scale scores)		
	2019	2020	2021
1	279	276	271
2	303	303	298
3	321	322	316
4	350	350	344
5	357	355	349
6	340	340	336
7	344	344	344
8	349	348	349
9	356	351	359
10	364	361	361
11	370	368	367
12	370	369	369

8 In all tables average scale scores are rounded to the closest integer.

Table B3: EL proficiency by grade and domain (scale scores)

DOMAIN	READING			LISTENING			SPEAKING			WRITING		
Grade/Year	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
1	292	287	288	325	320	315	252	255	248	258	255	244
2	319	319	317	326	325	319	260	268	261	297	294	285
3	334	333	327	349	350	343	272	283	278	317	314	308
4	355	355	348	412	411	407	308	313	303	337	335	330
5	360	359	352	421	418	411	310	314	303	346	343	339
6	344	346	343	392	396	395	313	314	308	326	320	314
7	350	352	352	397	399	401	313	314	313	330	325	323
8	356	358	358	402	404	406	314	317	316	334	329	329
9	371	370	380	387	386	395	305	301	310	351	340	344
10	379	380	382	391	394	397	311	312	311	360	350	345
11	385	387	388	396	401	403	315	319	318	366	356	352
12	386	388	390	396	402	405	316	319	320	367	358	354

Table B4: EL growth by grade

Grade/Year	EL Growth (overall composite scale score gain)	
	2019–2020	2020–2021
1	60	54
2	30	24
3	25	16
4	37	27
5	20	11
6	-4	-9
7	10	6
8	12	8
9	18	16
10	8	8
11	7	6
12	2	2

Table B5: EL growth by grade and domain (in scale score gains)

DOMAIN	READING		LISTENING		SPEAKING		WRITING	
Grade	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021
1	102	103	-16	-24	53	46	54	41
2	31	32	21	8	8	2	42	32
3	20	11	30	14	34	23	25	18
4	28	19	48	24	72	62	27	21
5	16	8	21	1	25	14	21	16
6	-2	-6	18	5	-10	-11	-13	-17
7	13	8	9	0	14	8	5	5
8	15	9	13	3	18	11	7	8
9	25	26	5	-1	2	-1	21	21
10	12	12	10	5	12	10	1	4
11	10	9	10	3	13	11	-1	3
12	5	5	5	-2	9	6	-6	-1

Table B6: EL growth by grade-level cluster (overall composite)

Grade-level cluster/Year	EL Growth (overall composite scale score gain)	
	2019–2020	2020–2021
1–2	45	39
3–5	27	18
6–8	6	2
9–12	8	8

Table B7: EL growth by grade-level cluster and domain

DOMAIN	READING		LISTENING		SPEAKING		WRITING	
Grade-level cluster	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021	2019-2020	2020-2021
1–2	66	67	2	-8	30	24	48	36
3–5	21	13	33	13	44	33	24	19
6–8	9	4	13	2	7	3	0	-2
9–12	13	13	7	1	9	7	4	7

Table B8: Demographic profile of tested students

Demographic Subgroup	Variable	2018–2019	2019–2020	2020–2021
Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino	64%	64%	66%
Gender	Female	45%	45%	45%
IEP Status	IEP	12%	12%	12%
Race	White	39%	37%	42%
	Black/African American	7%	7%	7%
	Asian	11%	11%	11%
	Native American/ Alaskan Native	8%	8%	8%
	Pacific Islander/ Hawaiian	2%	2%	2%
	Unknown	35%	37%	32%

Research Report