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English-Language Learning in the Classroom

A Philadelphia Literacy Story

ETS Researchers Examine Link Between Home Life and School Success

English-Language Assessments: Questions & Answers
A Letter From Kurt Landgraf

The ability to communicate through written and spoken language is among the most powerful tools we humans have at our disposal. Language shapes our thoughts and ideas and gives us an incredibly effective medium through which to interact with others.

In this issue of ETS Innovations, we examine how language and literacy are being taught and learned.

Our lead story looks at English-language learning in America’s public schools, where more than five million students for whom English is a second language are still acquiring the language skills needed to follow their classroom lessons.

What makes an effective literacy program? Researchers in ETS’s Philadelphia office are exploring that question in a project that also teaches adults how to read.

For a global perspective, we bring readers up to date on developments in English-language learning assessments, which students around the world take to expand their academic and professional opportunities.

Elsewhere, we explore the role of the home in nurturing and sustaining a child’s intellectual growth and academic achievement. As our research on this topic shows, the family constitutes the smallest — and in many ways the most important — school.

Language and literacy enrich individual lives. But they also improve life for all of us. After all, the more effectively we can use language to communicate with one another, the more common ground we can find among us.

Regards,

Kurt M. Landgraf
President and CEO
The numbers are staggering.

According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA), in the 2005-06 school year more than 5 million students in U.S. pre-kindergarten through high school classrooms were English-language learners.

This means that one out of every 10 American grade-school students was in the process of developing the English-language skills needed to succeed in school.

Given that these students speak more than 450 different languages — from Spanish, Russian and Arabic to Hindi, Hmong and Haitian Creole — educators face complex and extraordinary challenges in their efforts to reach and teach millions of promising young people.

Nor are those challenges confined to densely populated urban areas, where non-English-speaking immigrants to the United States have traditionally settled. Between 1995 and 2005, states such as Nebraska, North Carolina, Indiana and Alabama experienced increases of 300 percent or more in their ELL student populations.

In all, English-language learners today constitute one of the fastest-growing segments in American K-12 — kindergarten through high school — public education. The NCELA projects that by 2025, one out of every four students in U.S. classrooms will be an English-language learner.

Huge challenge, limited research

Yet educators are still at the beginning stages of developing an understanding of the needs of these diverse students, and how best to educate them and assess their skills and knowledge. ETS researchers have taken up the challenge.

The stakes are high. Students who fail to develop English-language proficiency risk losing out on educational and career opportunities, both in the United States, where English is the de facto national language, and abroad, where it is the lingua franca of the classroom and the workplace.

“The growth in the U.S. workforce over the next 20 years is projected to come largely from non-English-speaking immigrants, and American competitiveness will depend in large part on how effectively we educate non-English-speaking students,” says ETS Senior Research Scientist John Young.
Personal experience

“But more than that,” he says, “with such a large population of students, educators have an obligation to address the needs of English-language learners.”

Young and ETS Research Director Mary Enright and ETS Senior Assessment Director Maurice Hauck are leading a research initiative to better understand and serve this population of students.

Young brings personal experience to the effort: he was an English-language learner when he first entered school in the United States after his parents emigrated from China. Like many English-language learners today, Young was born and raised in the United States.

Evolving traditions

Since then, classroom approaches to English-language learning have evolved.

“The traditional view taken by many educators is that students who are not proficient in English should learn the language on their own,” Young says. “It’s our belief that assessment organizations, including ETS, have an obligation to English-language learners.”

For starters, researchers, policymakers and educators need to recognize that not all English-language learners fit into a single category.

2 strands of research: EFL vs. ESL

“When thinking about English-language learners, it is important to recognize the distinction between English as a Foreign Language, or EFL, and English as a Second Language, or ESL,” Enright says.

The research, she says, tracks these two categories — research related to English-language proficiency tests, and research related to content area, or “subject matter,” tests in such areas as math and science.

“EFL test takers learned English in their native countries where English is not widely spoken, and the focus is on tests that measure test takers’ ability to communicate effectively in English,” Enright says. These test takers, she says, are primarily served by English-language proficiency tests, such as ETS’s Test of English as a Foreign Language™ (TOEFL®), its Test of English for International Communication™ (TOEIC®), and its Test of Spoken English™ (TSE®).

Enright says that a robust research agenda already supports each of these assessment programs. “Education institutions, governments, and corporations use these tests for employment, graduate assistantships, licensure, and certification purposes,” she says. “For that reason, EFL test takers are usually older students. They generally are more self-selecting and self-motivated.”

Focus on K-12

The ESL population, on the other hand, comprises students who are learning English in a setting in which English is the principal language — for example, newly arrived immigrants in K-12 public schools in which English is the primary language of instruction, or native-born children whose immigrant parents speak their native language at home.

“With the ESL population, the focus is largely on K-12 issues,” says Hauck. “ESL test takers don’t choose to take tests. They are required to take tests as part of their classroom learning.”

Because the K-12 ESL population needs to use English to learn in the content areas, academic English — the language of the classroom — is of crucial importance to their success.

Best practices

“ESL research is relatively new, particularly for the K-12 population,” Hauck says.

“To gain a better understanding of the ESL population, ETS has done an extensive investigation, which included looking at the current and best practices in schools, states, and at the federal level to explore what ETS can offer to help ESL students develop their academic English-language proficiency.”

The initial research is already paying dividends. “A facet of the ESL strand of research involves the validity and fairness of assessment programs with content-area tests, and we are already putting into practice what we have learned,” he says.

Like other assessment organizations, ETS develops content-area tests. Because
these tests are meant to measure an individual's knowledge in a particular subject, the test should not rely heavily on language proficiency.

Making it clear

Young believes the initial research on English-language learners is already having a positive effect on test development by making the test items more valid for all test takers. This is not accomplished by diluting the difficulty of test items, he says. Rather, the test questions and options are written more clearly to benefit all examinees, but especially English-language learners.

To illustrate the value of clear language, Young cites a project by the Internal Revenue Service's Document Design Center to simplify the language used in tax forms. Seeing that only a fraction of taxpayers were able to complete a tax form for the sale of a house without significant errors, the IRS decided in the early 1990s to revise the form. They were able to eliminate some of the confusing jargon and make other language more direct.

As a result, the percentage of taxpayers successfully completing the form increased dramatically — to 55 percent from 10 percent.

Benefits for all

“Even participants’ body language suggested that although there were more line items on the revised form, they found it easier to fill out,” Young says. “It may not have made paying taxes any more pleasant, but it did make it less dreadful, with benefits for both the taxpayer and the government.”

As Young points out, the purpose of a tax form is to gather information to assess the proper amount of tax owed by the individual filing the form and not to assess the tax filer’s knowledge of IRS terminology.

“The same can be said for content-area tests, where the purpose is to measure skill or knowledge in a particular subject, not English-language proficiency,” he says.

Guidelines for accessibility

One step that assessment developers at ETS have taken to make all ETS assessments more accessible for all students, including English-language learners, is the development of the “ETS Guidelines for Using Accessible Language in Tests.”

The guidelines aim to ensure that ETS tests are, to the greatest extent possible, testing only what they claim to be testing.

“One thing we want to do,” Hauck says, “is to ensure that a math test, for example, has a minimal reading load so that students who have strong math skills can succeed on it, even if they do not have strong English-language reading skills.”

Hauck points out that while accessible language is particularly important to English-language learners, it serves all test takers well.

Effective approaches

Kenji Hakuta, a professor of Education at Stanford University, agrees. Hakuta addressed a recent ELL symposium ETS co-convened with the National Council of La Raza, the largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.

Hakuta noted that many approaches and practices that are considered effective in teaching ELLs are consistent with what works for all students. Schools, he said, should:

• use assessment data to improve student achievement and instruction
• ensure the availability of instructional resources
• implement a coherent, standards-based curriculum and instructional program
• prioritize student achievement

The ELL symposium, “The Language Acquisition and Educational Achievement of English-Language Learners,” was the most recent in ETS’s “Addressing Achievement Gaps” series of conferences.

In addition to the Accessible Language guidelines, ETS is developing a set of testing guidelines aimed at a wider array of issues for assessing English-language learners.

Essential research

These guidelines, for example, will address the use of testing accommodations for English-language learners. Accommodations are often used to remove the language-based, construct-irrelevant components of a test without altering the constructs that the test intends to measure.

ETS will share this second set of guidelines with others in the field of educational measurement as well as with the broader education community.

Although many of the issues surrounding English-language learning are not new, it’s a rapidly developing and relatively young field when it comes to scholarly work, assessment and public policy.

“Research is essential in learning how best to support teachers in their practice,” said Guadalupe Valdés, who like Hakuta is a Stanford professor who addressed the ELL symposium. “The problems before us are not simple, but at least we know about the data we need.”

Many approaches and practices that are effective in teaching ELLs are consistent with what works for all students, says Stanford Prof. Kenji Hakuta.
In a modest office in Center City Philadelphia, some two dozen tutors and assessment specialists are helping adults develop one of the most basic of life skills: the ability to read.

The students, tutors and testers are part of ETS’s Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Literacy Project, a set of reading research studies designed to assess and improve the literacy skills of learners for whom traditional classrooms came up short.

Each day the tutors, who include outside reading specialists as well as ETS researchers, work individually with more than a dozen different learners on research-based reading programs. They keep track of their students’ learning through logs, measurements and conversation, and help them discover the benefits and pleasures of reading.

In the process, they’re making discoveries themselves: about literacy, about learning, and about the value of something most people take for granted — like how to read a book, or the instructions on a medicine bottle, or their own mail.

The work these tutors and researchers are doing is also helping to meet the needs of countless others by developing, administering and analyzing progress and outcome measurements, and designing and improving literacy materials and programs.

“It’s gratifying to realize that this project has helped many individuals achieve literacy and personal life goals at the same time that it has helped us to unlock some of the complexities of literacy,” says ETS Research Scientist John Sabatini, the principal investigator for the project.

“As researchers, we tend to focus on the statistical evidence that demonstrates program effectiveness and learning gains,” says Sabatini, a former researcher at the National Center on Adult Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. “But this project also has had a direct impact on people’s lives.”

Project participants, he notes, have secured better jobs, earned diplomas, obtained driver’s licenses, and passed myriad other milestones.
REALi learning

ETS's Philadelphia literacy office opened in 2005 as the headquarters for the Relative Effectiveness of Adult Literacy Interventions (REALi) study, a federally funded project to compare the effectiveness of various methods for improving the reading abilities of low-literate adults.

The office now houses more than 10 literacy research projects, all focusing on underserved learners. Its main research aims are to better understand the origins of illiteracy; investigate the relative effectiveness of different literacy programs; and develop successful interventions, tutor and teacher training programs, tester training programs, and literacy measurement tools.

“Our overall challenge is to reduce the skills gap among underrepresented populations,” says Project Director Jane Shore. “We are learning ways to close this gap through the ongoing literacy research we conduct and the evidence-based literacy programming we offer.” The literacy tutoring is central to that programming.

One-on-one tutoring

Every day staff and tutors work one-on-one with their students. They conduct three 75-minute sessions a week with each student, preparing lessons, materials and other resources using the reading programs designed specifically for the research.

The tutors, many of whom are professional educators, undergo extensive training in screening, teaching, testing, scoring and classroom observation.

“It’s a committed group of diverse individuals, and a very positive environment,” says Sara Hutcheson, a tutor mentor and the manager of one of the key assessments developed through the work in Philadelphia, a computerized assessment of reading components.

To participate in the program, learners themselves must be able to read at a second- to sixth-grade level, receive recommendations from literacy teachers, and regularly attend local adult literacy classes as well as the 75-minute tutoring sessions.

Jennifer Lentini, the data manager for the projects, says that about 20 percent of the students have a ninth-grade education; only 15 percent have graduated from high school. Among the adult learners, ages range from 17 to 76, but most are 20 to 39.

“What’s most impressive is not the numbers,” Lentini says, “but the fact that learners have overcome great odds just to be here.”

Once in the program, students are placed in one of three reading programs that focus on decoding, fluency or a mix of each.

In all, the adult literacy component of the program has screened 1,200 adult learners, tested approximately 600, and conducted a literacy study comparing the relative effectiveness of three literacy programs involving approximately 160 learners. The eventual goal is to reach 180 to 240 individuals in the next two years.

Research results

Does the tutoring work? Test data show that 75 percent to 80 percent of participants improved their foundational reading abilities. “Learners’ views on what did and did not work for them in their project sessions are of particular interest to the teachers, and might be further investigated by the researchers,” says Shore. Helpful tutoring techniques reported by students include:

• focusing on spelling patterns and matching sounds with patterns
• repeating things so that they are learned
• using strategies, such as prediction and background knowledge
• focusing on speed, accuracy and expression

The project has also produced practical literacy tools. Working with experts, project staff created a “Guided Repeated Oral Reading” curriculum designed to increase students’ reading fluency and improve reading comprehension.

They have also collaborated with Philadelphia-area literacy groups and agencies to profile adult learners’ needs, and develop systems for tutor training, evaluation, mentoring, professional development and testing that might eventually extend to influencing the way programs operate.

Inspiring learners — and tutors

If the program has expanded students’ skills and opportunities and deepened researchers’ knowledge of literacy and learning, it has had an impact on the tutors as well.

“I had always wanted to work in research and enhance adult literacy in an urban setting — especially in my hometown of Philadelphia,” says Adjua McNeil, who recently earned a master’s degree in cognitive psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia.

“Being a part of investigations that support both the development of assessments and the administration of instructional programs seemed to be a wonderful opportunity, and unlike any other tutoring experience I have ever had,” McNeil says.

Says Nancy Cunningham, an experienced first-grade teacher, “When many of these students join the project they have low self-esteem, learning disabilities and family issues. However, when they excel in the project, I see a real change — an inspiration to learn. They truly inspire me.”
It has long been an article of faith that public education is “the great equalizer,” creating opportunities for children to achieve and excel regardless of their family background.

But that concept, so important to societies that value individual merit over inherited position, is under more stress than ever. Though public schools may strive to create equal opportunities for all children, new research shows that social and economic pressures on families are taking a heavy toll on their children’s readiness to learn and their ability to achieve.

“There is an enormous amount of cognitive development that occurs in the home before students even begin school,” says Richard J. Coley, Director of ETS’s Policy Information Center and co-author of a new ETS research report, *The Family: America’s Smallest School*, that examines the role of home and family as educational institutions.

“We know, for example, that by age four, a child in a family in which the parents are professionals is likely to have heard about 20 million more words than a child in a working-class family, and about 35 million more words than one in a family on social assistance,” says Coley.

In fact, data show that by kindergarten, there are already substantial differences in children’s reading and math test scores based on race and family background.

“No matter how hard the school works, some children never catch up,” says report co-author and Senior ETS Research Associate Paul E. Barton. “That means we need to do a better job of helping some parents understand the connection between what they do in the home and how well their children will do in school, and later in life.”

A global concern

The report’s findings about the U.S. mirror concerns elsewhere in the developed world. “Support for the view that early childhood education and care should be seen as a public good is growing, and has received strong impetus from the research of education economists,” notes a 2006 report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Starting Strong II*.

Improving early childhood education and care, the OECD argues, can strengthen a nation’s economic competitiveness; increase women’s participation in the workforce; address rising rates of childhood poverty; and help acculturate non-English-speaking immigrants.

The Family report is a follow-up to research ETS conducted in 1992. “In our earlier research, we noted that despite lots of talk...
about the importance of the family as an educational institution, the talk wasn’t translating into public policy,” says ETS President and CEO Kurt Landgraf.

“Unfortunately, not much has changed. For many minority and low-income Americans, things have only gotten worse.”

Among the new report’s key findings:

• 19 percent of U.S. children live in poverty — it’s as high as 33 percent for many minority groups.

• 33 percent of children live in families in which no parent has a full-time, year-round job.

• 62 percent of parents of high socio-economic status, or SES, read to their kindergarten-age children every day, vs. 36 percent among low-SES parents.

• By about age three, a child in a professional family has a larger vocabulary than a parent in a family on social assistance.


“This isn’t to suggest that single parents cannot raise successful, high-achieving children,” says Coley. “Many single parents do a great job raising their children.”

“But the research shows that, on average, children in father-absent families are more likely to have very significant issues that can undermine their academic success.”

He notes, for instance, that while 11 percent of all U.S. households are “food insecure” — at some time in the year, they were uncertain of having enough food to meet the needs of all members of the household — the rate for single-parent female-headed households is almost three times higher, 31 percent.

“An undernourished child is in no position to learn and study effectively,” Coley says.

**Impact on academic achievement**

How closely do home-life circumstances track academic performance?

Barton and Coley looked at four home-life factors — single-parent families, school absenteeism, reading to young children, and TV watching. Using data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), they found a “very strong association” between these four factors and reading scores. “In most of the 50 states, the four factors predicted the score quite closely,” Coley says. “In 38 states, the predicted score was within four points of the actual score on a scale of 0 to 500 points.”

The Family report is the most recent in a series of ETS studies examining the role of demographic, cultural, economic, ethnic and racial factors affecting learning and education in the United States.

In 2007, ETS released America’s Perfect Storm, which examined the confluence of three forces threatening long-term U.S. economic and social health — economic restructuring, inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy skills, and sweeping demographic changes driven by immigration.

In 2003, ETS’s Parsing the Achievement Gap reviewed the links between student achievement and factors related to students’ racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

**School-family collaborations**

The Family report’s authors are quick to note that they are not suggesting that family influences are more important to a child’s education than the quality of schooling. What they are suggesting is that schools, families and policymakers need to collaborate more closely given the importance of both school and home to a child’s education and to society’s health.

That’s already happening in some places. New York City, for example, recently assigned a school-parent coordinator in each public school. And in Lake County, Florida, teachers will put students’ test and homework scores, attendance records and progress reports on a secure website to help parents participate more fully in their children’s education. The website will also provide information to help parents with parenting, health and learning issues.

These collaborations recognize the equal importance of school and family, says Marc H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League, who wrote the Family report’s preface and participated at a press conference in Washington, D.C., at which the report was released.

“Education reform — even when it functions best, even if it achieves its objectives and goals — will not lift every child unless we combine it with what goes on in the home, what goes on with parents, what goes on with families,” Morial said.

Added Isabel V. Sawhill, Co-Director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, who also participated in the press conference, “Obviously we need to improve what happens in the classroom. But unless we simultaneously improve what happens outside the classroom and in the home, we will likely fail.”
Zoubir Yazid was recently appointed Managing Director of ETS Global BV, the global subsidiary of ETS. From his office in Amsterdam, Yazid spoke with ETS Innovations about trends and developments in English-language assessment and the Test of English as a Foreign Language™ (TOEFL®) and the Test of English for International Communication™ (TOEIC®).

Q: Why should a student or academic institution choose the TOEFL test over one of the other English-language assessments?

A: The key advantage of the TOEFL test is that it provides a test taker with what we like to call “a certificate to the world,” by which we mean that the TOEFL test is widely acknowledged as the best academic English-language proficiency test in the world. Doing well on the TOEFL test is a clear statement of a test taker’s facility with the English language. That’s why more than 6,000 colleges and universities around the world rely on TOEFL test scores. It’s certainly the best English-language academic assessment from a technical perspective. And it’s offered at more test centers than any other English-language assessment.

Q: Last year, ETS purchased Thomson Prometric and acquired Prometric’s network of test centers. What does that mean for test takers?

A: Prometric provides the technology platform to deliver many of ETS’s products, such as the TOEFL and GRE tests. ETS purchased Prometric so we could be certain our test takers would be served in the way we think is most important — that is, with a focus on quality, efficiency, convenience and follow through — rather than have to hope a new owner would share our values. Our customers’ experience is critical, and all of our efforts are focused on making their experience as positive as possible. Owning Prometric means that together we can manage the testing network in a way that is consistent with ETS’s mission to provide quality, access and equity in education for learners everywhere.

Q: The TOEFL and TOEIC tests both measure English-language proficiency. Shouldn’t there be a single test to do that?

A: Tests give the most valuable information when we use them for the purpose for which they were created. The TOEFL test focuses on measuring a person’s knowledge of academic English for people who are pre-
paring to enroll in an academic institution at which English is the language of instruction. In the workplace, however, companies need to know whether a prospective or current employee has a solid knowledge of the practical, everyday business English used throughout the world. That’s where the TOEIC test comes in.

English is used in both contexts, but there are different ways of using the language and different needs and expectations involved.

For example, the Samsung Group, Korea’s largest company, has begun to use the TOEIC Speaking test in recruiting and evaluating employees with regard to their English-language proficiency. That reflects a growing awareness among leading global companies that English-language skills are a competitive advantage for both companies and individuals in the global economy.

The TOEFL test, however, is considered a passport to success for students who wish to study in English-speaking academic institutions, both in the United States and abroad. That’s why we make test preparation products specifically to help students prepare for what they are likely to encounter on the TOEFL test.

And so in China, for example, we recently entered into an agreement with New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc., China’s largest private educational services provider, to make TOEFL Practice Online available as part of its language-training and test-preparation courses and to the general public through its bookstores. ETS, of course, will continue to sell the TOEFL Practice Online through our website, www.ets.org, and in other countries through other resellers.

Of course, in some areas the two tests can be said to overlap. But overall, each test is tailored to a specific context — essentially, the classroom or the workplace.

**Q:** What trends do you see in English-language learning?

**A:** We believe that English will remain the language of international business for a long period, and that, as a result, the demand for English-language skills will continue to grow. But it is also very likely that other languages will gain prominence as the world and global commerce evolve.

For ETS, this means that while the demand for English-language tests will remain strong for the foreseeable future, we are also looking at opportunities to aid education and business with regard to the development of tests in other languages.

**Q:** What are your goals as the new Managing Director of ETS Global BV?

**A:** My main goal for the next couple of years is to continue to standardize our approach to the needs for global assessments with regard to our current and new products and services. We’ll pursue this by growing our capacity to deliver our products and services; by tailoring our approach to each country based on that country’s specific need and local culture; and, most of all, by continuing to provide exceptional service to test takers and our customers and clients.

**Q:** ETS Global BV has been opening offices and expanding its network of representatives. Why?

**A:** Ironically, the best way to operate globally is to have a strong presence locally. That’s the best way to learn about and respond to local needs, offer more services that are more relevant locally, and best serve test takers and our customers and clients in the context of ETS’s standards and values. In essence, it means realizing our mission: to advance educational opportunities for all people worldwide.
ETS Innovations brings you news, insight and information on educational assessment in the United States and around the world, from research and test design, administration, scoring and reporting, to test use in and out of the classroom.