Deaf Students and English Learner Services

Overview

Deaf students are diverse, with a wide range of language and educational backgrounds. Unfortunately, many deaf students have experienced some degree of language deprivation during childhood and often have delayed language skills in English.[1] Around 25% of deaf children in the United States are multilingual, and many have a home language other than English.[2,3,4,5] An estimated 50% of deaf individuals have an additional disability.[4,6] Additional disabilities also often have an impact on language development. English is the primary language of instruction in the United States, so deaf students may benefit from services and support that focus on English language development.

This document provides an overview of English language proficiency (ELP), how it is measured when it comes to eligibility for English learner (EL) services, and what this may mean for deaf students.

English Language Proficiency

According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as ESEA (recently amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA[7]), ELs are students who are still building English fluency.[8,9] State definitions can vary but largely follow the federal guidelines.[10] ELP can mean different things in different contexts. For K–12 students, proficiency in English generally means being able to participate in English-based classroom instruction without support.

The following four areas represent ELP, according to ESSA:

- Listening
- Speaking
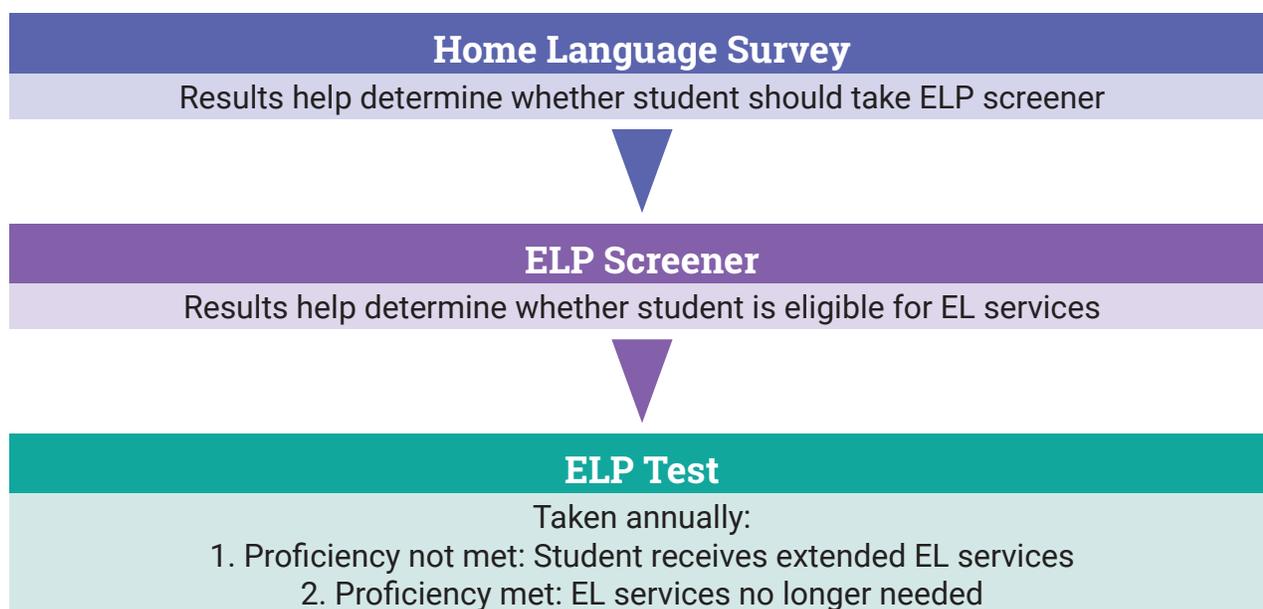- Reading
- Writing

English Language Proficiency Standards

ELs are presented with two challenges in English-based classrooms: (a) learning a second language and (b) learning academic content in that second language. The purpose of the ELP standards is to support ELs as they engage with academic subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies) before they gain English fluency. The focus of these standards is on communication of ideas across academic contexts.[11]

ELP has some overlap with English language arts (ELA), and states work to coordinate support for English language acquisition with ELA content standards.[8,12] For example, ELA might include reading different types of texts, integrating information across different resources, or writing for different audiences. ELP is focused on English development in both receptive (listening and reading) and expressive (speaking and writing) domains for students whose native language is not English.

How is English language proficiency measured?

Families who are new to a school or district may receive what is called a "Home Language Survey."[13] If the survey indicates that the student might come from a home where a language other than English is used, the student is referred to ELP testing. The purpose of an ELP test is to measure a student's English proficiency to know whether the student is ready for classroom environments where the content is delivered in English without support. There are two tests: an ELP screener, which is given at intake, and then the ELP test itself, which is given each year while the student is still receiving EL services. Each state (or group of states) has their own test of ELP skills. Scores on the ELP screener test determine whether the student is eligible for services to support English language development. States, districts, and schools are held accountable for progress that students make toward developing English proficiency. For ELs with disabilities, these English language development services would be in addition to any services and supports the student might receive based on eligibility based on their individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan.

Screening and Testing Protocols

Home Language Survey
Results help determine whether student should take ELP screener

▼

ELP Screener
Results help determine whether student is eligible for EL services

▼

ELP Test
Taken annually:
1. Proficiency not met: Student receives extended EL services
2. Proficiency met: EL services no longer needed

What kinds of services support ELs?

Students who do not demonstrate English language fluency on the ELP screener assessments are eligible for EL services. Each year an ELP assessment is used to determine whether or not EL services should be continued. The format, duration, and curriculum of these English language development supports vary by state.[14] Services and programs are sometimes referred to as support for "English as a second language" or "English language development." These programs vary in the language of instruction, ranging from bilingual to English only. Programs may reinforce the embeddedness of supports and services in a mainstreamed or separate context. Professionals involved in these services have specific training in second-language acquisition as well as ways to scaffold learning for students while they are also learning academic content (e.g., mathematics). The emphasis of this support is on moving toward independent receptive and expressive English skills so that students can be successful in classrooms with instruction in English without additional support.

What does this mean for deaf students?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)[15] and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act[16] (Section 504) provide deaf students access to services and accommodations that focus on reducing access barriers in the classroom. Some example barriers include access to instruction, communication, learning opportunities, and interaction with peers. Policies for ELs, on the other hand, are guided by ESSA, and are considered separate from IDEA guidance.[17]

The majority of deaf students receive special education services under IDEA. Some, however, may also be eligible for EL services under ESSA. Some further points to keep in mind:

- Many deaf students come to schooling with English delays, and some do not have a robust first language of any kind due to language deprivation during early childhood.[1]

- Under ESSA, a deaf student is referred to the ELP screener only if the Home Language Survey indicates that their home language is other than English.[8] ESSA policy specifies that native languages must be related to country of origin, and not disability, so using American Sign Language at home would rarely be a sole reason for referral to the ELP screener. Each state also has its own version of the Home Language Survey and the ELP screener.

- Regulations guiding the provision of services under IDEA,[15] ESSA,[7] and Section 504[16] vary and have different implications for service provision, monitoring, and due process.

- A student is not required to take all parts of the ELP test if the student's IEP or 504 team determines that the disability precludes measurement of the domain and appropriate accommodations are not available.[8] For example, a student can participate in the reading and writing portion of the ELP test even when not completing the listening and speaking sections.

- Accommodations that are used in tests of ELA may not be applicable for tests of ELP because the tests have different goals. The goal of the ELP assessments is to measure progress on English language acquisition and readiness for classroom instruction in English without support. ELA tests measure content area knowledge on broader language arts as an academic domain, often for accountability purposes. There may be places where an accommodation provided for ELA is not provided for ELP because of a concern about changing what is being measured.

Deaf students who are ELs may benefit from EL services. Use federal and state policies to advocate and support instruction for these deaf students!

Additional Considerations

Determinations about ELP test participation for deaf students depend on many factors. There are many nuances to these decisions, and each ELP domain should be considered separately. Perspectives from professionals with experience working with deaf EL populations are particularly valuable in these team decisions.[18,19]

Possible starting points for discussion include the following:

- What is the student's history related to effective accommodations in the classroom as well as in testing?

- Can the deaf student benefit from accommodations that will provide auditory access to the listening portion of the test?

- Are accommodations needed to assist the student in being understood? Is familiarity with the test taker's speech production needed for accurate scoring?

- Do the deaf student's additional disabilities factor into decisions about accommodations for specific domains?

Notes and References

[1] Holcomb, T., & Peyton, J. K. (1992). *ESL literacy for a linguistic minority: The deaf experience*. Retrieved from **http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/ESLlit.html**

[2] Cannon, J. E., Guardino, C., & Gallimore, E. (2016). A new kind of heterogeneity: What we can learn from d/deaf and hard of hearing multilingual learners. *American Annals of the Deaf, 161*(1), 8–16.

[3] Compton, S. E., & Compton, S. (2014). American Sign Language as a heritage language. In T. Wiley, J. Peyton, D. Christian, S. Moore, & N. Liu (Eds.), *Handbook of heritage, community, and Native American languages in the United States* (pp. 272–283). New York, NY: Routledge.

[4] Gallaudet Research Institute. (2011). *Regional and national summary report of data from 2010-12 annual survey of deaf and hard of hearing children and youth*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University. Retrieved from **https://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/2012_National_Summary.pdf**

[5] Pizzo, L. (2016). d/Deaf and hard of hearing multilingual learners: The development of communication and language. *American Annals of the Deaf, 161*(1), 17–32.

[6] Garberoglio, C. L., Palmer, J., Cawthon, S. W., & Sales, A. (2019). *Deaf people and educational attainment in the United States: 2019*. Washington, DC: Office of Special Education Programs, National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes.

[7] ESSA provides guidance, funding, and accountability to states to support students from low-income families. ESSA includes guidance related to academic standards and annual testing of student progress toward those standards. Specific guidance is provided for testing ELs and students with disabilities. More information can be found at **www.ed.gov/essa**

[8] U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *Non-regulatory guidance: English learners and Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Education.

[9] Federal law defines a "limited English proficient" student as a student
- who is aged 3 through 21;
- who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;
- who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
- who is a Native American or Alaska Native or a native resident of the outlying areas; and
- who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of ELP; or
- who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and
- whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual
  - the ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement on state assessments;
  - the ability to succeed in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
  - the opportunity to participate fully in society.

[10] Education Commission of the States. (2014a). *How is an "English language learner" defined in state policy?* Retrieved from **http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2?rep=ELL1402**

[11] WIDA Consortium. (2012). *2012 amplification of the English language development standards, kindergarten-grade 12*. Madison, WI: Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

[12] Council of Chief State School Officers. (2014). *English language proficiency (ELP) standards: Introduction and overview*. Retrieved from **https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/migrantbilingual/pubdocs/elpa21introductionoverview.pdf**

[13] Education Commission of the States. (2014b). *What methods are used to identify English language learners?* Retrieved from **http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2?rep=ELL1403**

[14] Education Commission of the States. (2014c). *What program approaches does state policy authorize?* Retrieved from **http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2?rep=ELL1404**

[15] IDEA provides guidance, funding, and rights for students with disabilities to receive special education services that they need to access a rigorous and equitable education. More information can be found at **https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea**

[16] Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provides protections for students with disabilities to participate in federally funded programs including elementary and secondary education. More information can be found at **https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#Rehab-Act**

[17] Meléndez de Santa, T. (2011). *Title III services for ASL users*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

[18] Baker, S., & Scott, J. (2016). Sociocultural and academic considerations for school-age d/Deaf and hard of hearing multilingual learners: A case study of a deaf Latina. *American Annals of the Deaf, 161*(1), 43–55.

[19] Becker, S. J., & Bowen, S. K. (2018). Service providers' perspective on the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing and English learners. *American Annals of the Deaf, 163*(3), 356–373.