

Comments on WIDA Assessments and Resources

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What do you like about the WIDA tools?

WIDA has both English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards and several English proficiency tests which helps to connect curriculum, instruction and assessment for ELLs. We have found the WIDA standards useful in that they are leveled fairly and integrated with the content areas. They are very helpful for both ESOL and content-area teachers to consider what language skills are necessary, for example, in a 9th grade history classroom. Since the standards describe skills at each proficiency level, they are useful for scaffolding and considering how to build skills step-by-step. Since the WIDA Consortium compared content standards from many states to consider which topics should be used as examples, the WIDA Standards help to ground the language skills with a particular content focus. The WIDA assessment tools reflect this content integration as well, so students need to show they can understand/use English within an academic context.

How do you use the WIDA Standards?

We use the WIDA English language proficiency framework as a way to assess and talk about students school-wide. This provides a common platform for ESOL teachers to share information about students (across grade levels) and with mainstream colleagues (within a grade level). It is ONE of the factors we use for placement/exit (along with grades, observations and teacher recommendations). WIDA also has other tools such as an ELP Standards Resource Guide, speaking/writing rubrics and "Can Do" indicators describing what students can do at different proficiency levels. These are accessible on the WIDA website and teachers have used them as the basis for report cards, describing students to mainstream colleagues or in designing our own assessment tools.

How is the W-APT administered?

All WIDA tools (standards and assessments) consider the four language domains (reading, writing, speaking & listening) separately. The R, W, L sections of the W-APT can be group administered and don't need a trained teacher (you can record the listening scripts on a CD or MP3) but should be scored by the ESOL teacher. The speaking test should be administered by a trained ESOL specialist, and must be given individually. We allow 2 hours for the testing but it depends on how many speaking tests are given simultaneously. For most students, our Admissions office will give the R, W, L subtests and then an ESOL teacher will finish with the speaking test and score all sections. This is useful since the speaking and writing rubrics are holistic and require professional judgment. The WIDA Composite level is a combined score which weights R and W higher than S and L. While it is difficult to reduce a student to a single number, we have found this to be a useful indicator of potential success for applicants.

How do you use the W-APT?

We use the W-APT as an admissions screening test in grades 2-12. We have established acceptance thresholds for each grade level and have general target of no more than 25% students in any grade level being served by the ESOL program, so the test helps us decide when our "ELL seats" are filled. It also helps with

placement in that a students' scores can give an initial indication of what level of support would be most appropriate. The W-APT is only an entry point, however. Since the test was designed as an initial placement test, it is not as useful for measuring progress over time or as an exit tool. Also, for obvious reasons, a student shouldn't take the same test at the beginning and end of the year, or year after year.

What grade levels are tested?

The W-APT has grade bands: K, 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 but no different versions of tests within those grade bands. WIDA recommends that the lower level WAPT be given to students on the "cusp" of a grade band. That is, for students in the first semester of 3rd grade, they should take the grade 1-2 W-APT rather than the grade 3-5 W-APT. We have found, however, that the test for the actual grade level gives us a better indication of whether a student can be successful at our school.

What other tests has the WIDA Consortium developed?

The WIDA ACCESS for ELLs test is a high-stakes and high-security assessment used for district, state and national reporting in the US. For this reason it is only available to states within the WIDA consortium, with no exceptions. As a result, WIDA has developed another English language assessment tool, the WIDA MODEL which is currently available for lower elementary. This assessment kit is colorful, organized and easy to administer. We have just started evaluating it but we are hoping to use it for mid-year or end-of-year testing. Upper elementary, middle/high school versions of the MODEL should be available in the fall.

How does W-APT work with young learners?

For first graders at SAS at the beginning of the year, the K-1 W-APT is pretty easy. However, it does give us general information about their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills that indicates whether they will need language support. The drawback of this test is that it does not assign a WIDA score, so teachers usually use their own understanding of grade 1 expectations to determine whether the child needs ESOL support. For incoming first graders second semester, the 1-2 W-APT is pretty hard. The reading and writing component is especially tough, and native speakers might even struggle with it. However, the speaking component alone is useful as an indicator of general English proficiency. We have had to adapt and interpret scores and develop our own internal benchmarks, but in general the test is a useful tool for admissions.

How is working with WIDA?

The staff at WIDA have been extremely helpful and responsive in providing materials and answering questions. Since they are connected with the Educational Research facilities of the University of Wisconsin, they have some great people working with them both on development and outreach.