

Relationships Between English Language Proficiency and ACT® Test Performance of English Learners: Results From Two States

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Two recent research reports investigated relationships between English language proficiency and the performance of English learners (ELs) taking the ACT® test (Moore & Schnieders, 2026; Moore et al., 2026). This data byte summarizes the main findings from both reports related to the relationships between ELs' language proficiency and ACT performance. Consult the full reports for additional details.

Two U.S. states agreed to participate in this study. Both states have been administering the ACT to virtually all Grade 11 students since before the 2017–2018 school year and are part of WIDA (<https://wida.wisc.edu/>), a consortium of states led by the University of Wisconsin–Madison. WIDA develops resources for supporting ELs and their teachers, including ACCESS, a set of summative English proficiency assessments administered annually to K–12 students in more than 40 states. The ACCESS assessments include the four domains of Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking and four composite scores: Oral Language (50% Listening + 50% Speaking), Literacy (50% Reading + 50% Writing), Comprehension (70% Reading + 30% Listening), and Overall (35% Reading + 35% Writing + 15% Listening + 15% Speaking). Each domain score and composite score is reported both as a level on a 1.0–6.0 scale and as a score on a 100–600 scale.

Both states provided data files containing demographic information about their students—including EL status—and granted permission for WIDA to share student-level data from the ACCESS English language proficiency assessments with ACT. State 1 provided data from the 2017–2018 through 2023–2024 school years (except for 2020–2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic); State 2 provided data from the 2018–2019 through 2022–2023 school years. State 1 is smaller with approximately 2% ELs in the study sample ($N = 642$ ELs and 35,234 non-ELs); State 2 is larger with approximately 10% ELs in the study sample ($N = 15,788$ ELs and 143,461 non-ELs). Approximately 7% of Grade 11 students (11% across K–12) in public schools in the United States are ELs (NCES, 2024).

Table 1 and Table 2 contain correlations between ACT scores and ACCESS English proficiency assessment scores for Grade 11 ELs taking the ACT in State 1 and State 2, respectively. For both states, correlations between ACT performance and ACCESS performance were moderate and positive, with higher correlations seen between ACCESS Reading and ACT scores as well as between ACCESS Comprehension (a composite of Reading and Listening scores) and ACT scores.

Table 1. Correlations Between ACT Scores and ACCESS Scores for Grade 11 ELs Taking the ACT, State 1

ACCESS domain	ACT				
	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
Reading	0.45	0.37	0.41	0.36	0.53
Writing	0.27	0.21	0.23	0.20	0.30
Listening	0.35	0.34	0.32	0.30	0.43
Speaking	0.22	0.17	0.24	0.20	0.27
Oral Language	0.32	0.28	0.32	0.28	0.40
Literacy	0.41	0.33	0.36	0.32	0.47
Comprehension	0.45	0.40	0.41	0.37	0.54
Overall	0.40	0.34	0.37	0.33	0.48

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Correlations Between ACT Scores and ACCESS Scores for Grade 11 ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

ACCESS domain	ACT				
	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
Reading	0.40	0.28	0.36	0.27	0.45
Writing	0.22	0.17	0.19	0.13	0.25
Listening	0.34	0.27	0.30	0.24	0.39
Speaking	0.18	0.16	0.16	0.13	0.22
Oral Language	0.29	0.25	0.26	0.21	0.34
Literacy	0.36	0.26	0.32	0.24	0.41
Comprehension	0.41	0.30	0.37	0.29	0.47
Overall	0.36	0.28	0.33	0.25	0.42

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$.

The remainder of this data byte focuses on the ACCESS Reading assessment for several reasons: First, the ACCESS Reading and Overall scores for the two states in this study were highly correlated (0.83–0.84), meaning that the results would be similar no matter which score was used. Second, students are reclassified as English proficient at an ACCESS Overall level score between 4.0 and 5.0 in both states, meaning that few ELs in the sample had an Overall score above Level 4, whereas ELs scored across the full distribution of Levels 1–6 on ACCESS Reading. Additionally, accessing content on the ACT (not including the optional writing test) relies more heavily on reading skills than on listening, speaking, and writing, so reading is a highly relevant domain of English proficiency for ACT performance.

Table 3 and Table 4 contain the average ACT scores by ACCESS Reading level for Grade 11 ELs taking the ACT in State 1 and State 2, respectively. In both states, for each ACT test section and Composite score, there is a clear pattern of ACT scores increasing as ACCESS Reading level increases.

Table 3. Average ACT Scores by ACCESS Reading Level for Grade 11 ELs Taking the ACT, State 1

ACT section	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Entering	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	10.3	10.7	11.1	11.4	12.8	13.8
Math	13.8	14.1	14.3	14.6	15.3	16.5
Reading	11.8	12.2	12.9	12.8	14.4	15.7
Science	13.3	13.6	14.2	14.7	15.4	16.5
Composite	12.4	12.8	13.3	13.5	14.6	15.7

Table 4. Average ACT Scores by ACCESS Reading Level for Grade 11 ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

ACT section	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Entering	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	9.9	10.1	10.8	11.3	11.9	13.6
Math	13.7	13.8	14.0	14.4	14.6	15.7
Reading	11.6	11.9	12.4	12.8	13.6	15.3
Science	13.2	13.3	13.8	14.2	14.5	16.0
Composite	12.2	12.4	12.9	13.3	13.8	15.3

State 2 provided student-level Grade 11 course grade information, which we used to calculate overall and subject-specific Grade 11 GPA. Table 5 contains the average Grade 11 GPA by ACCESS Reading level for State 2. Similar to the pattern revealed in Tables 3 and 4, Grade 11 GPA increases as ACCESS Reading level increases.

Table 5. Average Grade 11 GPA by ACCESS Reading Level for ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

GPA	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Entering	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	1.90	1.97	2.07	2.13	2.34	2.61
Math	1.55	1.61	1.75	1.86	2.02	2.34
Social studies	1.82	1.97	2.18	2.28	2.45	2.72
Science	1.72	1.84	2.02	2.09	2.31	2.60
Overall	2.20	2.28	2.42	2.50	2.64	2.85

Table 6 contains correlations between ACT scores and Grade 11 GPA by ACCESS Reading levels for State 2. For ELs at Levels 1 and 2, the correlations between ACT scores and GPA are small; however, the correlations increase as ACCESS Reading levels increase, indicating a stronger relationship between Grade 11 GPA and ACT scores for students with higher levels of English proficiency. For comparison, the correlations between ACT scores and Grade 11 GPA for non-ELs are higher than those for ELs, ranging from 0.42 for ACT reading–social studies to 0.55 for ACT Composite–overall GPA.

Table 6. Correlations Between ACT Scores and Grade 11 GPA by ACCESS Reading Level for ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

ACT section– GPA in subject	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Entering	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English–English	0.06*	0.06	0.12	0.15	0.21	0.25
Math–math	0.08	0.04*	0.17	0.21	0.22	0.32
Reading–social studies	0.04 ^{ns}	0.09	0.14	0.16	0.16	0.20
Science–science	0.06*	0.09	0.13	0.11	0.20	0.23
Composite– overall GPA	0.09	0.12	0.19	0.25	0.30	0.34

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$ unless noted; * indicates significant at $p < 0.05$; ^{ns} indicates not significant.

These results show that there is a positive relationship between English proficiency as measured by ACCESS Reading scores and performance on the ACT. In particular, the average ACT scores and correlations between ACT scores and Grade 11 GPAs of ELs at ACCESS Reading Levels 1 and 2 are very low, suggesting that ELs with low English proficiency may struggle to adequately demonstrate their knowledge and skills on the ACT. Although further research is needed to help disentangle the extent to which the lower performance of ELs is due to limited English proficiency or to lack of content knowledge, this study indicates that the scores of ELs at the lowest English proficiency levels should be interpreted with caution. It is important to use multiple measures rather than a single test score to gain a holistic picture of ELs' academic achievement and postsecondary readiness.

References

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