Coursework Patterns of English Learners in Grade 11: Evidence From One State

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A recent research report investigated relationships between English language proficiency and the performance of English learners (ELs) taking the ACT® test (Moore et al., 2026). This data byte provides a summary of the findings pertaining to differences in students' Grade 11 coursework patterns by EL status and English language proficiency level. Additional details can be found in the full report.

The study sample was from a U.S. state that has been administering the ACT to virtually all Grade 11 students for multiple years and is 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. Data files from the state contained demographic information and Grade 11 course transcript data. The state also granted permission for WIDA to share student-level data from the ACCESS English language proficiency assessments with ACT. The state provided data from the 2018–2019 through 2022–2023 school years, including approximately 10% ELs (N = 15,788 ELs and 143,461 non-ELs).

Table 1 contains the distribution of the highest level of courses taken in English, math, and science by the Grade 11 ELs and non-ELs in the study sample. The highest-level course was based on typical course progressions in U.S. high schools (ACT, 2006). (Social studies courses are not typically taken in a particular order and were therefore excluded from this analysis.)

Across subject areas, Grade 11 ELs were more likely to take lower-level courses and less likely to take higher-level courses. For example, only 4% of ELs took English 12 or another advanced English course as their highest-level English course in Grade 11 compared to 19% of non-ELs, whereas 87% of ELs took English 11 as their highest-level English course compared to 75% of non-ELs. Similarly, ELs were less likely to take calculus or other advanced math (0.4% vs. 5% of non-ELs) or precalculus, trigonometry, or statistics (2% vs. 17% of non-ELs) as their highest-level math course, whereas ELs were more likely than non-ELs to take Algebra 2, geometry, algebra, or general math as their highest-level math course. In science, ELs were less likely to take physics (10% vs. 25% of non-ELs) as their highest-level science course, and ELs were more likely to take chemistry (32% vs. 23% of non-ELs) and earth, general, or other science (29% vs. 23% of non-ELs) as their highest-level science course.

Table 1. Distribution (Percentage) of Highest-Level Courses in English, Math, and Science Taken by Grade 11 ELs and Non-ELs Taking the ACT

Highest course in sequence	ELs (%)	Non-ELs (%)
English 12 or other advanced English	4	19
English 11	87	75
Below English 11	7	2
General or other English	2	4
Calculus or other advanced math	0.4	5
Precalculus, trigonometry, or statistics	2	17
Algebra 2	62	57
Geometry	22	11
Algebra or lower math	5	2
General or other math	9	8
Physics	10	25
Other advanced science	25	24
Chemistry	32	23
Biology	4	5
Earth, general, or other science	29	23

Note. Students who did not take a course in a given subject area or with missing data for this variable were excluded from these calculations (11% and 14% in English, 8% and 9% in math, and 13% and 16% in science for ELs and non-ELs, respectively).

Table 2 contains the distribution of the most rigorous course across subject areas for courses taken in Grade 11 by the ELs and non-ELs in the study sample. Course rigor was based on a variable provided by the state and defined as the most rigorous course taken by the student during Grade 11. For example, students who took one or more college or dual enrollment courses were classified as “college/dual enrollment,” and students whose courses were general education or below were classified as “general.” ELs were less likely to take college or dual enrollment courses (2% vs. 10% non-ELs) or advanced or honors courses (34% vs. 51% non-ELs) as their most rigorous course and more likely to take general education courses (61% vs. 37% non-ELs).

Table 2. Distribution (Percentage) of Most Rigorous Course Taken by Grade 11 ELs and Non-ELs Taking the ACT

Highest level of course rigor	ELs (%)	Non-ELs (%)
College/dual enrollment	2	10
Advanced/honors	34	51
General	61	37
Basic/remedial	0.1	0
Unspecified	3	2

Note. Students with missing data for this variable were excluded from these calculations. The missing rates were 1% for ELs and 3% for non-ELs.

Table 3 contains the distribution of the highest level of courses taken in English, math, and science by ACCESS Reading level. A similar pattern emerged that Grade 11 ELs with higher levels of English reading proficiency were more likely to take higher-level courses such as English 12, other advanced English, calculus, other advanced math, precalculus, trigonometry, statistics, Algebra 2, or physics as their highest-level courses. Conversely, students with lower levels of reading proficiency were more likely to take lower-level courses such as those below English 11; algebra or lower math; general or other math; biology; or earth, general, or other science as their highest-level courses.

Table 3. Distribution (Percentage) of Highest-Level Course in English, Math, and Science Taken in Grade 11 by ACCESS Reading Level and EL Group

Course	Level 1: Entering (%)	Level 2: Emerging (%)	Level 3: Developing (%)	Level 4: Expanding (%)	Level 5: Bridging (%)	Level 6: Reaching (%)
English 12 or other advanced English	2	3	4	5	5	8
English 11	82	87	89	89	88	85
Below English 11	14	9	5	5	5	3
General or other English	2	2	2	2	2	3
Calculus or other advanced math	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.3	1	1
Precalculus, trigonometry, or statistics	0.3	1	1	2	2	5
Algebra 2	47	57	66	69	71	72
Geometry	26	25	21	21	17	15
Algebra or lower math	10	6	5	3	3	2
General or other math	17	12	7	5	5	5
Physics	5	6	9	11	15	21
Other advanced science	28	26	26	20	24	20
Chemistry	28	32	32	35	33	31
Biology	6	4	3	4	2	5
Earth, general, or other science	34	32	29	30	26	23

Note. ELs who did not take a course in a given subject area or with missing data for this variable were excluded from these calculations (11% in English, 8% in math, and 13% in science).

Table 4 contains the distribution of the most rigorous course across subject areas for courses taken in Grade 11 by ACCESS Reading level. ELs with higher levels of reading proficiency were more likely to take college or dual enrollment courses and advanced or honors courses and less likely to take general education courses as their most rigorous course than ELs with lower levels of reading proficiency.

Table 4. Distribution (Percentage) of Most Rigorous Course Taken in Grade 11 by ACCESS Reading Level and EL Group

Highest level	Level 1: Entering (%)	Level 2: Emerging (%)	Level 3: Developing (%)	Level 4: Expanding (%)	Level 5: Bridging (%)	Level 6: Reaching (%)
College/dual enrollment	1	1	2	3	4	5
Advanced/honors	25	28	32	36	41	48
General	69	65	61	56	50	43
Basic/remedial	0.3	0	0.1	0.1	0.2	0
Unspecified	5	6	5	5	5	4

Note. Students with missing data for this variable were excluded from these calculations (1%).

The results of this study indicate that, compared to their non-EL peers, ELs were less likely to take higher-level courses—defined as courses further along in the sequence of high school courses in a given subject area or as college-level, dual-enrollment, advanced, or honors courses. This finding is consistent with the findings of a previous study of ACT-tested ELs that relied on self-reported data (Moore, 2021). Among ELs, as their English reading level increases, the likelihood of their taking higher-level and more rigorous courses increases as well.

This data byte provides evidence that ELs may not be exposed to the same educational opportunities and experiences in high school as their non-EL peers. This could be due to many factors, including having had to take time away from academic coursework to learn English. It is important to consider these differences when making inferences about what ELs know and can do and when speculating about the various reasons ELs tend to have lower scores on standardized assessments of academic knowledge. ELs need to learn both the English language and academic content to graduate from high school ready for college or a career. Understanding these resource gaps and opportunities for ELs will help us better support all students.

References

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