Exploring Relationships Between English Proficiency and ACT® Test Performance of English Learners Addendum: ACT Writing

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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: *Exploring Relationships Between English Proficiency and ACT Test Performance of English Learners: State 1* (Moore & Schnieders, 2026) and *Exploring Relationships Between English Proficiency and ACT Test Performance of English Learners: State 2* (Moore et al., 2026). This issue brief provides the results of additional analyses examining the performance of ELs on the ACT writing test. Additional details can be found in the full reports.

ACT began offering testing supports to ELs in the fall of 2017, including (a) extended time (one and one-half time, single day), (b) translated test instructions that ACT provides, and (c) an approved word-to-word bilingual dictionary without definitions. These supports are intended to remove construct-irrelevant variance and allow ELs to more accurately demonstrate their knowledge and skills. It should be noted that there is a process for requesting supports where students or school officials initiate the request, school officials provide ACT with documentation of eligibility to receive the supports, and ACT approves the use of the supports. The analyses in this report are based on ELs who were approved to take the ACT with supports, but ACT does not collect information about actual use of the supports during testing.

Two U.S. states agreed to participate in this study. Both states are part of the WIDA consortium and have had statewide contracts to administer the ACT to virtually all Grade 11 students since before the 2017–2018 school year. WIDA is a consortium of states led by the University of Wisconsin–Madison and develops resources for supporting ELs and their teachers, including ACCESS, a set of summative English proficiency assessments administered annually to all K–12 students in more than 40 states. The ACCESS assessments include four domains—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 and composite is reported as both a level on a 1.0–6.0 scale and a score on a 100–600 scale.

Each state provided data files containing demographic information about their students, including EL status, and each state granted permission for WIDA to share student-level ACCESS data with ACT. State 2 also provided Grade 11 high school transcript data, which allowed us to conduct additional analyses using Grade 11 GPA, courses taken, and credit hours earned. State 1 provided data from the 2017–2018 through 2023–2024 school years (except for 2020–2021, which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic), and State 2 provided data from

the 2018–2019 through 2022–2023 school years. State 1 is a smaller sample with approximately 2% ELs in the study sample (*N* = 642 ELs and 35,234 non-ELs), and State 2 is a larger sample 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 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Table 1 and Table 2 contain the demographic characteristics of the data samples for State 1 and State 2, respectively. In both states, ELs were predominantly Hispanic/Latino (79% of all ELs in State 1 and 87% of all ELs in State 2). Non-ELs in State 1 were predominantly white (81%), whereas non-ELs in State 2 were a more diverse group, with 38% Hispanic/Latino, 35% white, 11% Black / African American, and smaller percentages of students from other racial/ethnic groups. ELs in both states were also more likely to be eligible for free/reduced-price lunch compared to non-ELs (51% versus 23% in State 1 and 68% versus 47% in State 2).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics (*n* and Percentage) of Data Samples, State 1

Student characteristic	ELs with supports	All ELs	Non-ELs	Total
Female	94 (52%)	268 (42%)	17,389 (49%)	17,657 (49%)
Male	88 (48%)	374 (58%)	17,845 (51%)	18,219 (51%)
American Indian / AK Native	0 (0%)	29 (5%)	773 (2%)	802 (2%)
Asian	11 (6%)	36 (6%)	285 (1%)	321 (1%)
Black / African American	1 (1%)	7 (1%)	295 (1%)	302 (1%)
Hispanic/Latino	142 (78%)	505 (79%)	4,364 (12%)	4,869 (14%)
Native HI / Pacific Islander	2 (1%)	4 (1%)	40 (0.1%)	44 (0.1%)
Two or more races	0 (0%)	5 (1%)	922 (3%)	927 (3%)
White	26 (14%)	56 (9%)	28,555 (81%)	28,611 (80%)
Free/reduced-price lunch eligible	83 (46%)	326 (51%)	8,220 (23%)	8,546 (24%)

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics (*n* and Percentage) of Data Samples, State 2

Student characteristic	ELs with supports	All ELs	Non-ELs	Total
Female	1,508 (47%)	6,802 (43%)	72,042 (50%)	78,844 (50%)
Male	1,717 (53%)	8,984 (57%)	71,376 (50%)	80,360 (50%)
American Indian / AK Native	1 (0%)	12 (0.1%)	1,242 (1%)	1,254 (1%)
Asian	208 (6%)	1,147 (7%)	9,985 (7%)	11,132 (7%)
Black / African American	50 (2%)	307 (2%)	15,587 (11%)	15,894 (10%)
Hispanic/Latino	2,887 (90%)	13,776 (87%)	54,163 (38%)	67,939 (43%)
Native HI / Pacific Islander	14 (0.4%)	137 (1%)	2,379 (2%)	2,516 (2%)
Two or more races	5 (0.1%)	57 (0.4%)	9,661 (7%)	9,718 (6%)
White	60 (2%)	352 (2%)	50,444 (35%)	50,796 (32%)
Free/reduced-price lunch eligible	2,176 (67%)	10,767 (68%)	67,633 (47%)	78,400 (49%)

The ACT writing test is optional for students who take the national ACT, but states that administer the ACT statewide may choose to require the writing test for all their students, which was the case for the two states participating in this study. The writing test is a single prompt describing three perspectives on a complex issue, and students are instructed to write an essay in 40 minutes analyzing the issue and developing their own perspective on the issue. The essay is scored by two trained raters, one of which may be ACT's CRASE+® automated essay scoring engine, on a 1-to-6 scale in four domains (ideas and analysis, development and support, organization, and language use). The two scores are summed for each domain to provide four domain scores, each on a 2-to-12 scale. The overall writing score is the rounded average of the four domain scores on a 2-to-12 scale. The average writing score is between 6 and 7 (ACT, 2026).

Table 3 contains the percentages of students who took the ACT writing test by state and group. Approximately 99% of the students in each state took the ACT writing test. ELs in both states were less likely to have taken the writing test than non-ELs, and ELs who took the ACT with supports were slightly less likely to have taken the writing test than ELs who took the ACT without supports.

Table 3. Percentage of Students Who Took the ACT Writing Test by State and Group

Group	State 1	State 2
ELs with supports	92	93
ELs without supports	94	96
All ELs	93	96
Non-ELs	99	99
Total	99	99

Table 4 contains the average ACT writing scores and standard deviations of students by state and group, and Table 5 contains the score distributions (percentages of students at each ACT writing test score point) by state and group. In both states, ELs had lower scores than non-ELs, and ELs who took the ACT with supports had lower writing scores than ELs who took the test without supports. The score distributions show that ELs in both states were much more likely to have scores at or below a 6, and non-ELs were more likely to have scores between 6 and 8. In fact, no ELs in State 1 scored above a 9, and no ELs in State 2 scored above a 10 (see Table A1 in the appendix). ELs who took the ACT with supports had lower scores than ELs who took the ACT without supports in both states, with more pronounced differences in both average scores and score distributions in State 1.

Table 4. Average ACT Writing Scores by State and Group

Group	Mean, State 1	*SD*, State 1	Mean, State 2	*SD*, State 2
ELs with supports	4.2	1.5	4.4	1.5
ELs without supports	4.7	1.6	4.6	1.5
All ELs	4.6	1.6	4.6	1.5
Non-ELs	6.3	1.6	6.3	1.8
Overall	6.3	1.6	6.1	1.8

Table 5. Distribution (Percentage) of ACT Writing Scores by State and Group

State	ACT writing score	ELs with supports	ELs without supports	All ELs	Non-ELs
1	2	20	9	12	2
	3	10	13	12	3
	4	28	24	25	10
	5	18	20	19	12
	6	18	22	21	31
	7	4	7	6	15
	8	2	5	4	22
	9	0	0.5	0.3	4
	10	0	0	0	2
	11	0	0	0	0.2
	12	0	0	0	0
2	2	12	10	10	2
	3	13	11	12	4
	4	31	31	31	11
	5	17	18	18	14
	6	20	23	22	28
	7	3	5	5	14
	8	2	3	3	20
	9	0.1	0.2	0.2	4
	10	0.1	0	0.1	3
	11	0	0	0	1
	12	0	0	0	0.1

Average ACCESS scores and distributions of ACCESS levels by state and group can be found in the full reports. In both states, ELs who took the ACT with supports tended to have slightly lower ACCESS scores than ELs who took the ACT without supports, but the differences were generally small, indicating that the two groups had similar levels of English proficiency on average. A greater percentage of ELs in State 1 who took the ACT with supports had scores at Level 1 compared to ELs who took the ACT without supports.

Table 6 contains correlations between ACT writing scores and ACCESS scores by state and group. Across all the ACCESS scores and composites, State 1 had higher correlations with ACT writing scores than State 2. For both states, higher correlations were also found between language proficiency and ACT writing scores for ELs who took the ACT with supports than for ELs who took the ACT without supports. For both states, the highest correlations were found between ACT writing scores and the ACCESS Overall score, followed by ACCESS Literacy (a composite of Reading and Writing); the lowest correlations were found between ACT writing and ACCESS Listening and Speaking.

Table 6. Correlations Between ACT Writing Scores and ACCESS Scores

State	ACCESS domain	ELs with supports	ELs without supports	All ELs
1	Reading	0.52	0.39	0.42
	Writing	0.52	0.35	0.41
	Listening	0.51	0.34	0.40
	Speaking	0.48	0.34	0.39
	Oral Language	0.55	0.41	0.46
	Literacy	0.59	0.44	0.49
	Comprehension	0.57	0.41	0.46
	Overall	0.62	0.47	0.52
2	Reading	0.39	0.37	0.37
	Writing	0.43	0.40	0.41
	Listening	0.35	0.32	0.32
	Speaking	0.31	0.25	0.27
	Oral Language	0.39	0.34	0.35
	Literacy	0.49	0.46	0.47
	Comprehension	0.41	0.39	0.39
	Overall	0.49	0.46	0.46

Note. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 7, Table 8, and Table 9 present average ACT writing scores by ACCESS level for ELs who took the ACT with supports, ELs who took the ACT without supports, and all ELs, respectively, in State 1; Table 10, Table 11, and Table 12 present average ACT writing scores by ACCESS levels for ELs who took the ACT with supports, ELs who took the ACT without supports, and all ELs, respectively, in State 2. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations. For both states, we can see that as ELs' performance on any of the four ACCESS domains increases, ACT writing performance also increases. We also see that ELs who took the ACT with supports tended to have lower average ACT writing scores than ELs who took the ACT without supports, with only a couple of exceptions (Speaking at Level 2 for State 1 and Speaking at Level 4 for State 2). As mentioned previously, ELs who took the ACT with supports had slightly lower ACCESS scores than ELs who took the ACT without supports, which may help explain the lower ACT writing scores of ELs who tested with supports.

Table 7. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for ELs Taking the ACT With Supports, State 1

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	—	3.8	4.3	—	4.9	5.1
Writing	—	3.3	4.2	5.2	—	—
Listening	—	—	4.2	4.2	4.9	5.2
Speaking	2.7	4.4	4.7	—	—	—
Oral Language	2.2	3.5	4.5	5.2	—	—
Literacy	—	3.0	4.4	5.1	—	—
Comprehension	—	3.3	4.3	4.8	4.8	5.5
Overall	—	2.9	4.5	5.1	—	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Table 8. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for ELs Taking the ACT Without Supports, State 1

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	3.5	4.3	4.8	5.0	5.0	5.7
Writing	—	3.8	4.6	5.3	—	—
Listening	3.4	3.8	4.4	4.8	4.9	5.5
Speaking	3.7	4.4	5.0	5.4	—	—
Oral Language	3.5	3.7	4.8	5.4	—	—
Literacy	—	3.7	4.7	5.4	6.0	—
Comprehension	—	3.9	4.9	5.0	5.1	5.7
Overall	—	3.6	4.6	5.5	—	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Table 9. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for All ELs Taking the ACT, State 1

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	3.1	4.1	4.6	4.9	5.0	5.6
Writing	3.2	3.6	4.5	5.3	—	—
Listening	2.9	3.5	4.4	4.7	4.9	5.4
Speaking	3.3	4.4	4.9	5.3	—	—
Oral Language	3.0	3.6	4.7	5.3	5.2	—
Literacy	2.6	3.4	4.6	5.3	5.9	—
Comprehension	2.5	3.8	4.7	4.9	5.0	5.6
Overall	2.5	3.4	4.6	5.4	—	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Table 10. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for ELs Taking the ACT With Supports, State 2

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	3.4	4.0	4.4	4.6	5.0	5.2
Writing	3.1	3.6	4.5	5.3	—	—
Listening	3.2	3.5	4.1	4.5	4.8	5.0
Speaking	3.8	4.5	4.9	5.5	—	—
Oral Language	3.6	4.0	4.6	5.2	5.5	—
Literacy	3.0	3.5	4.5	5.3	5.7	—
Comprehension	3.0	3.8	4.3	4.6	5.0	5.2
Overall	3.1	3.7	4.6	5.4	5.7	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Table 11. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for ELs Taking the ACT Without Supports, State 2

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	3.6	4.2	4.7	4.9	5.1	5.4
Writing	3.5	3.9	4.7	5.4	6.5	—
Listening	3.5	3.9	4.3	4.7	4.9	5.2
Speaking	4.1	4.6	5.0	5.3	—	—
Oral Language	3.8	4.2	4.8	5.3	5.7	—
Literacy	3.2	3.8	4.7	5.4	6.1	—
Comprehension	3.3	4.1	4.5	4.9	5.1	5.5
Overall	3.3	3.9	4.7	5.5	6.3	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Table 12. Average ACT Writing Scores by ACCESS Domain and Level for All ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

ACCESS domain	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
Reading	3.6	4.2	4.6	4.8	5.1	5.4
Writing	3.4	3.8	4.6	5.4	6.5	—
Listening	3.5	3.8	4.3	4.7	4.9	5.2
Speaking	4.0	4.6	5.0	5.3	—	—
Oral Language	3.8	4.2	4.7	5.2	5.6	—
Literacy	3.2	3.8	4.6	5.4	6.0	—
Comprehension	3.3	4.0	4.5	4.8	5.1	5.4
Overall	3.2	3.9	4.7	5.4	6.1	—

Note. Values are omitted for cells containing fewer than 20 observations.

Due to insufficient sample sizes for several of the ACCESS domain levels, the remaining analyses presented in this report that use ACCESS levels will focus on ACCESS Reading levels as the primary measure of English proficiency so that we can examine students across the full distribution of Levels 1–6. Reading is relevant for accessing the test content, and ACCESS Reading is positively correlated with ACCESS Writing (0.51 for all ELs in State 1 and 0.45 for all ELs in State 2) and ACCESS Overall (0.84 for all ELs in State 1 and 0.83 for all ELs in State 2; correlation tables can be found in the full research reports).

Table 13 contains the correlations between ACT writing scores and Grade 11 GPAs for ELs who took the ACT with supports, ELs who took the ACT without supports, all ELs, and non-ELs in State 2 (high school course data were not available for State 1). Correlations between ACT writing scores and each GPA subject were similar for ELs who took the ACT with and without supports. Correlations were smaller for ELs compared to non-ELs. Across ELs and non-ELs, ACT writing scores were more highly correlated with grades in English and social studies and less highly correlated with grades in math.

Table 13. Correlations Between ACT Writing Scores and Grade 11 GPAs, State 2

GPA subject	ELs with supports	ELs without supports	All ELs	Non-ELs
English	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.44
Math	0.16	0.15	0.15	0.38
Social studies	0.22	0.26	0.25	0.43
Science	0.20	0.19	0.19	0.40
Overall	0.26	0.26	0.25	0.48

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

Table 14, Table 15, and Table 16 contain correlations between ACT writing scores and Grade 11 GPAs by ACCESS Reading level for ELs who took the ACT with supports, ELs who took the ACT without supports, and all ELs, respectively, in State 2. Across the three groups, the correlations are mostly non-significant for ELs at Level 1 and non-significant or statistically significant but small for ELs at Level 2. ELs scoring at Level 3 or higher have statistically significant correlations between ACT writing scores and Grade 11 GPAs with the exception of the correlation between ACT writing and English GPA for ELs who tested with supports and scored at ACCESS Reading Level 3. The correlations generally increase as ACCESS Reading level increases, with some exceptions from Level 4 to Level 5.

Table 14. Correlations Between ACT Writing Scores and Grade 11 GPAs by ACCESS Reading Level for ELs Taking the ACT With Supports, State 2

GPA subject	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	−0.09^{ns}	0.02^{ns}	0.08^{ns}	0.25	0.21	0.18
Math	−0.04^{ns}	0.05^{ns}	0.11*	0.15*	0.14	0.12*
Social studies	−0.09^{ns}	0.10*	0.15	0.21	0.23	0.28
Science	0.04^{ns}	0.05^{ns}	0.11*	0.23	0.15	0.18
Overall	−0.05^{ns}	0.11	0.12	0.29	0.21	0.22

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

Table 15. Correlations Between ACT Writing Scores and Grade 11 GPAs by ACCESS Reading Level for ELs Taking the ACT Without Supports, State 2

GPA subject	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	−0.04^{ns}	0.08	0.16	0.18	0.18	0.31
Math	−0.05^{ns}	0.03^{ns}	0.09	0.13	0.12	0.26
Social studies	0.04^{ns}	0.14	0.20	0.25	0.23	0.30
Science	0.01^{ns}	0.07	0.12	0.22	0.17	0.25
Overall	0.03^{ns}	0.11	0.16	0.22	0.22	0.33

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

Table 16. Correlations Between ACT Writing Scores and Grade 11 GPAs by ACCESS Reading Level for All ELs Taking the ACT, State 2

GPA subject	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
English	−0.06*	0.07	0.14	0.20	0.18	0.27
Math	−0.05^{ns}	0.04*	0.10	0.13	0.12	0.22
Social studies	0.01^{ns}	0.13	0.19	0.23	0.23	0.30
Science	0.02^{ns}	0.06	0.12	0.22	0.16	0.23
Overall	0.01^{ns}	0.11	0.15	0.24	0.21	0.30

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

A series of regression models were used to capture the extent to which student characteristics (as well as course-taking patterns and Grade 11 GPA for State 2) account for the variance in the ACT writing scores of ELs above and beyond their level of English proficiency. Models 1 through 3 below were estimated for State 1, and Models 1 through 4 were estimated for State 2. Additional details and the models predicting ACT English, math, reading, and science scores can be found in the full papers.

Model 1: ACT score = ACCESS score

Model 2: ACT score = ACCESS score + EL supports

Model 3: ACT score = ACCESS score + EL supports + demographics

Model 4: ACT score = ACCESS score + EL supports + demographics + Grade 11 GPA and coursework

Table 17 contains the results of regression models from State 1 predicting ACT writing scores from ACCESS Reading scores, an indicator for whether students took the ACT with supports, and an indicator for whether students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. ACCESS Reading scores were found to be a significant predictor of ACT writing scores. Free and reduced-price lunch was not a significant predictor. Taking the ACT with supports was associated with lower performance on ACT writing, which was a surprising finding, since the supports are intended to remove construct-irrelevant variance due to limited English proficiency and allow students to more accurately demonstrate their knowledge and skills. However, if lower-ability students are more likely to take the ACT with supports, then we might expect to see a negative association even when controlling for ACCESS scores. We also ran exploratory models predicting ACT writing scores from ACCESS Writing scores, ACCESS Overall scores, and both ACCESS Reading and ACCESS Writing scores, as well as a model adding ACT Composite score as an additional covariate, and the results were virtually identical across all models. Based on the R^2 values across models, ACCESS Reading scores accounted for 18% of the variance in ACT writing scores. Adding EL supports to the model increased the adjusted R^2 by 0.02, and adding free and reduced-price lunch status contributed less than 0.01.

Table 17. Regression Model Results Predicting ACT Writing Score, State 1

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	*SE*	β	*SE*	β	*SE*
Intercept	−3.59***	0.73	−3.44***	0.72	−3.24***	0.73
ACCESS Reading score	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00
EL with supports	—	—	−0.54***	0.13	−0.55***	0.13
Free/reduced-price lunch	—	—	—	—	−0.17^{ns}	0.12
Adjusted R^2	—	0.18	—	0.20	—	0.20

*** Indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.0001$; ^{ns} indicates not significant.

Table 18 contains the results of regression models from State 2 predicting ACT writing scores from ACCESS Reading scores, an indicator for whether students took the ACT with supports, an indicator for whether students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, Grade 11 overall GPA, total number of course credits earned in Grade 11, and highest rigor of coursework taken in Grade 11 (college-level / dual enrollment or advanced/honors vs. general, basic/remedial, or unspecified). All the predictors except free and reduced-price lunch were significant predictors of ACT writing scores, and as with State 1, we found a negative relationship between taking the ACT with supports and performance on the writing test even after controlling for multiple

variables, including ACCESS Reading scores, grades, and coursework. Based on the R^2 values across models, ACCESS Reading scores accounted for 14% of the variance in the ACT writing score. Adding EL supports and free and reduced-price lunch status contributed less than 1% to the variance, and adding GPA, credits earned, and advanced coursework increased the adjusted R^2 by 4%.

To further investigate why a negative relationship was found between testing with supports and performance on the ACT writing test, we examined the percentage of students who did not receive a writing score at each ACCESS Reading level by group (Table 19). Students may receive no score if their essay is blank, off-topic, illegible, not in English, or void (ACT, 2013). For both states and across EL groups, ELs at ACCESS Reading Level 1 and, to a lesser extent, Level 2 were much more likely to have not received a writing score. ELs who took the ACT with supports had higher missing rates at Levels 1–3 than ELs who tested without supports. This differential attrition could help explain the counterintuitive finding of the regression models if it introduced bias into the samples. Another potential explanation is that there were unmeasured differences in the students who obtained the supports; while all ELs are eligible for the supports, fewer than one third of the ELs in the study took the ACT with supports, and it is unknown why some ELs tested with supports and others did not.

Table 18. Results of Regression Analysis Predicting ACT Writing Score, State 2

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	β	*SE*	β	*SE*	β	*SE*	β	*SE*
Intercept	−2.00***	0.15	−1.98***	0.15	−1.93***	0.15	−1.73***	0.15
ACCESS Reading score	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00	0.02***	0.00	0.01***	0.00
EL with supports	—	—	−0.15***	0.03	−0.15***	0.03	−0.19***	0.03
Free/reduced-price lunch	—	—	—	—	−0.05*	0.03	−0.04^{ns}	0.03
Grade 11 overall GPA	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.22***	0.02
Number of credits earned	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.04***	0.01
Advanced coursework	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.42***	0.03
Adjusted R^2	—	0.14	—	0.14	—	0.14	—	0.18

*** Indicates statistical significance at $p < 0.0001$; ^{ns} indicates not significant.

Table 19. Percentages of ELs Missing ACT Writing Score by State and EL Group

State	Group	Level 1: Entering	Level 2: Emerging	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Expanding	Level 5: Bridging	Level 6: Reaching
1	ELs with supports	27	11	5	0	3	0
	ELs without supports	25	9	2	0	0	1
	All ELs	26	9	3	0	1	1
2	ELs with supports	28	8	2	1	1	0
	ELs without supports	17	4	1	1	0	1
	All ELs	20	5	1	1	1	0

Conclusion

This issue brief examined relationships between English proficiency and performance on the ACT writing assessment. The findings for ACT writing were generally consistent with the findings in the full research reports examining relationships between English proficiency and performance on ACT English, math, reading, science, and Composite scores (Moore & Schnieders, 2026; Moore et al., 2026). ACCESS scores were significant predictors of performance on the ACT writing test in that higher English proficiency was associated with higher ACT writing scores. Correlations between Grade 11 GPA and performance on the ACT writing test were small and largely non-significant for ELs at ACCESS Reading Level 1, with larger correlations at higher levels of reading proficiency. As with the full reports, the results of these analyses suggest that users of ACT scores should take into account ELs' English proficiency levels when interpreting their ACT writing scores and use caution when interpreting the ACT scores of ELs at the lowest levels (i.e., students with ACCESS Reading scores at Level 1 or Level 2), as limited English proficiency may be introducing construct-irrelevant variance in their scores.

One counterintuitive finding of these analyses was that EL supports were associated with lower ACT writing scores in both states. Future research should investigate the causes of this phenomenon. Is it due to differences in the characteristics of students who take the ACT with or without supports, such as lower English language proficiency or lower writing ability? Could other factors be introducing construct-irrelevant variance? For example, are students spending too much time looking up words in a word-to-word dictionary rather than constructing their responses? As noted in the introduction, ACT does not collect information about actual use of the supports during testing, and additionally, most ELs are approved to test with more than one support, making such analyses difficult without a special study.

This study was limited to two U.S. states and may not generalize to the entire U.S. population or to other states, and some differences in results were found between the two states. However, this study provides valuable information about how the English proficiency of ELs relates to their performance on the ACT. It is important that users of test scores consider not only the knowledge and skills that are being measured by the test but also other contextual information that may be relevant when interpreting scores. Limited English proficiency can affect ELs' ability to adequately access the test content and accurately respond to the test items, leading to construct-irrelevant variance and resulting in scores that may not fully represent what students know and can do. This study provides evidence that English proficiency is indeed strongly related to performance on the ACT, and caution should be exercised when interpreting the scores of students at the lowest levels of English proficiency. Future research should replicate these findings with other testing programs and in other states to further build up evidence of how well we are measuring the knowledge and skills of English learners when the test content is in English, especially for students with low levels of English proficiency.

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Appendix

Table A1. Distribution (Counts) of ACT Writing Scores by State and Group

State	ACT writing score	ELs with supports	ELs without supports	All ELs	Non-ELs
	2	34	40	74	594
	3	17	57	74	1,068
	4	47	102	149	3,442
	5	30	85	115	4,353
	6	30	97	127	10,653
1	7	6	29	35	5,269
	8	3	21	24	7,532
	9	0	2	2	1,329
	10	0	0	0	585
	11	0	0	0	82
	12	0	0	0	9
	2	367	1,160	1,527	2,630
	3	396	1,341	1,737	5,206
	4	941	3,736	4,677	16,230
	5	523	2,175	2,698	19,939
	6	598	2,718	3,316	39,372
2	7	103	605	708	19,675
	8	67	317	384	28,444
	9	4	20	24	6,236
	10	3	5	8	3,657
	11	0	0	0	737
	12	0	0	0	175

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