

## **Chapter 5**

# **English Language Learners (ELLs) and the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Program**

Demographic projections indicate that the nation's English language learner (ELL) student population will experience high levels of growth in the coming years. This growth, in combination with the impact of federal and state testing requirements on schools and students, makes the development of appropriate assessment measures for ELLs a priority for Texas educators and the Texas Education Agency.

Texas ELLs currently participate in the current Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) program in several ways. Based on predefined test eligibility criteria, ELLs take the regular TAKS tests, a Spanish version of TAKS available in grades 3–5, or a TAKS test with linguistic accommodations. In accordance with state law, certain immigrant ELLs may meet eligibility criteria to temporarily be granted a test exemption on the basis of limited English proficiency.

ELLs also participate in the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), a federally required assessment program that provides an annual measure of their progress in learning the English language.

### ***A Look at ELL Students***

The number of ELLs in Texas public schools has risen steadily during the past decade—from about 570,000 in 2001 to more than 800,000, or about 1 in 6 students, in 2010. ELLs are a diverse group of students. They know English to varying degrees when they enter U.S. schools and may have widely differing educational and sociocultural backgrounds. Most ELLs in Texas are U.S. born and educated. The immigrant population is sizable, however. In spring 2010 more than 15% of ELLs in Texas in grades 3–12 were reported as having been in U.S. schools for less than three years.

It takes a number of years for a student who does not know English upon entry to U.S. schools to become fluent and able to use English effectively and independently in academic settings. The amount of time it takes is influenced by factors such as the ELL's initial level of English proficiency, native language literacy, prior academic preparation, socioeconomic status, and mobility, as well as by the quality of the student's ongoing instruction.

To meet their second language acquisition needs, Texas ELLs are served in either bilingual education programs or English as a second language (ESL) programs. The goal of bilingual programs is to develop literacy and academic skills in the student's primary language and English. ESL programs integrate English-language instruction with academic instruction delivered in English. The ELPS under 19 TAC Chapter 74 require teachers in all disciplines and programs to linguistically accommodate the instruction of ELLs commensurate with their English language proficiency levels.

The sections below describe current state and federal testing requirements for ELLs and presents options for STAAR ELL assessment policies and assessments.

### ***Overview of Current ELL Academic Skills Assessments and Assessment Policies***

Currently ELLs participate in the state assessment program in the following ways.

- Eligible recent immigrants may be granted a limited English proficient (LEP) exemption from testing for up to three years under state law. The vast majority of ELLs take TAKS.
- In federally mandated grades and subjects, exempted ELLs are required to be assessed. In these grades and subjects, exempted ELLs take TAKS with linguistic accommodations. The scores of these students are used only for federal accountability.
- LEP exemptions from exit level TAKS tests are not permitted. ELLs are required to take these tests to meet graduation requirements. Exit level testing may be postponed during a new immigrant's first 12 months in U.S. schools as long as the student has the opportunity to take the exit level tests before the student's scheduled graduation date.
- ELLs who receive special education services take TAKS, TAKS (Accommodated), TAKS–Modified (TAKS–M), or TAKS–Alternate (TAKS–Alt) in accordance with the established test participation criteria. If these students are recent immigrants, they are eligible for a LEP exemption and, as exempted students, for tests with linguistic accommodations in federally mandated grades and subjects.

### ***Overview of Current English Language Proficiency Assessment Policies***

- All K–12 ELLs participate in TELPAS, which assesses the progress ELLs make in learning English in the language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. ELLs take TELPAS annually until they are no longer classified as LEP in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS).

### ***Differences in State and Federal Testing Requirements***

Both state and federal testing regulations require ELLs to be taught the same grade-level academic skills as other students. Texas law provides for the administration of Spanish-version state assessments in grades 3–5, the grades in which large numbers of Spanish-speaking ELLs receive native language instruction. For immigrant ELLs for whom Spanish-version tests are not appropriate or available, Texas law provides limited test exemptions, postponements, and/or accommodated assessments for a maximum of three years, with two additional years of exemption possible for a small number of ELLs identified as unschooled asylees or refugees. State law requires the commissioner of education to establish rules to ensure that, within the specified time periods, students are included in the assessment program at the earliest practical date.

Federal regulations for assessing ELLs differ from state regulations in that they prohibit test exemptions from federally required assessments in mathematics, reading, and science. Title I, Part A, sec. 1111(a)(3)(C) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act requires states to assess all ELLs

in a valid and reliable manner and provide reasonable accommodations, including, to the extent practicable, assessments in the language and form that are most likely to yield accurate data about what students know and can do in academic content areas.

To fulfill federal requirements, states have largely moved away from exempting students. Instead, most states have developed policies for providing ELLs with linguistic accommodations during the administration of their general assessments. A small number of states have developed native language tests or test versions that are rewritten in language that is more accessible for ELLs.

Questions exist about how to accurately measure what ELLs know and can do in academic content areas during the time that they are still fairly new to the English language. As federal regulations moved states away from exemption policies, researchers began to conduct studies about how to effectively measure the academic content knowledge of these students. Researchers generally regard native language assessments as useful for measuring the knowledge of students who receive academic instruction in their native language, but as being of limited utility for measuring the skills of ELLs who receive academic instruction in English. Studies of the effectiveness of providing ELLs linguistic accommodations in conjunction with tests administered in English are starting to be conducted but represent a relatively new area of assessment research.

### ***Current TAKS Linguistic Accommodation Policy in Texas***

Under the TAKS program TEA responded to the mandate to include all ELLs in federally required mathematics, reading, and science tests by administering TAKS with linguistic accommodations to recent immigrant ELLs who are exempt under Texas law. The linguistically accommodated testing process, referred to as LAT, makes a variety of linguistic accommodations available to help exempted ELLs better understand the English on the TAKS tests. The students are included in federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) accountability measures. Since they are exempt under state regulations, they are not included in state assessment or accountability data. Fewer than 10% of the state's ELLs take TAKS with linguistic accommodations. The table below shows the grades and subjects in which exempt ELLs take TAKS with linguistic accommodations, in fulfillment of federal testing requirements.

**TAKS with Linguistic Accommodations (LAT)**

Subject	Grades
Reading	3-8
Mathematics	3-8, 10
Science	5, 8, 10
ELA	10

The primary linguistic accommodations provided through the LAT process are listed below. Test administrators provide several of the accommodations at the request of the student. Students use other accommodations independently.

- Clarification of meaning of words and phrases (at request of student)
- Oral translation of words and phrases (at request of student)
- Reading aloud words and phrases (at request of student)
- Bilingual dictionary or word list (glossary)
- English and Spanish test form used together (grades 3–5)

For LAT administrations, secure mathematics and science linguistic simplification guides are provided for test administrators to use with students who receive a clarification accommodation. For each test question where students may request a clarification, the guides provide suggested ways for test administrators to clarify the meaning of words that may be unfamiliar to ELLs with emergent English. The guides also stipulate which mathematics and science terms are specifically assessed and are, therefore, not permitted to be clarified for students.

Several grades and subjects of the TAKS program fall outside the federal mandate that prohibits test exemptions. These include grade 9 reading and mathematics, grades 4 and 7 writing, and grades 8 and 10 social studies. ELLs do not take these tests during the time they are exempt from testing under state law. The LAT process is not used at the exit level either. As indicated earlier, state regulations do not permit exit level test exemptions. Regulations do, however, allow newly arrived immigrant ELLs to be eligible for a 12-month postponement of exit level testing as long as they have the opportunity to test at least once before their scheduled graduation date.

## **Transition from Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to STAAR for ELLs**

TEA has gathered information from a variety of stakeholders and experts to plan for the inclusion of ELLs in the STAAR program. In spring 2010, a voluntary statewide survey about ELL assessment and inclusion policies was completed by approximately 800 Texas administrators and teachers. TEA has also obtained advice from

- an ELL assessment focus group of Texas bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) specialists, teachers, principals, and testing coordinators;
- a district testing coordinator advisory committee;
- the national technical advisory committee for the state testing program; and
- nationally recognized researchers who specialize in the instruction and assessment of ELLs.

Based on the information received, the Texas Education Agency will, to the extent possible under current state and federal statute, consider the following when developing ELL assessment policies for STAAR.

- Spanish-version tests—Continue to provide Spanish-version assessments in grades 3–5.
- Exemptions from testing—Consider narrowing the provisions for exemptions from academic skills testing, with the possible exception of eligible first-year and unschooled immigrants. Provide opportunities to include as many ELLs as possible in STAAR using Spanish-version tests and expanded linguistic accommodations that effectively support the accuracy of the results for ELLs who have traditionally been exempt. Develop appropriate accountability inclusion policies when ELL STAAR participation requirements have been established.
- Linguistic accommodations—Consider expanding linguistic accommodations during testing beyond the currently exempted recent immigrant student population by allowing limited accommodations for ELLs at higher levels of English proficiency. The Texas English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) implemented in 2008 require teachers across the curriculum to linguistically accommodate the instruction of all ELLs commensurate with their English language proficiency levels. This would align STAAR testing requirements with curriculum requirements by allowing linguistic accommodations during testing that are commensurate with students’ language proficiency needs.
- Time limits on substantial linguistic accommodations—To uphold high expectations for the learning of English, consider setting limits on the number of years in which an ELL may be permitted to take STAAR with a substantial degree of linguistic accommodation. A limit of three to four years should be sufficient for ELLs who enter U.S. schools with a solid academic foundation. For ELLs with extenuating needs, an additional one to two years should be considered depending on the severity of the needs. ELLs with extenuating needs include those who
  - come to the U.S. as immigrants with limited or no prior schooling,
  - have significant learning and language gaps caused by moving back and forth between the U.S. and another country,
  - arrive in U.S. schools from another country late in the school year, or
  - have disabilities that are detrimental to language-learning processes.

### ***STAAR Test Development Plans for ELLs***

TEA plans to develop the following assessments to meet the needs of ELLs during the time in which the students are eligible to take other than the regular STAAR versions.

#### ***Spanish Versions of STAAR***

Spanish versions of STAAR will be developed in grades 3–5 in each grade and subject assessed by the STAAR English versions. Test development processes are being implemented to ensure that the

Spanish-version STAAR tests are linguistically and culturally appropriate for the students tested and comparable to the English-version tests in content, rigor, and achievement standards.

### ***Linguistically Accommodated STAAR – STAAR L***

For grades 3–8 and high school, plans are being made for the development of computer-based linguistically accommodated versions of STAAR, currently referred to as STAAR L. STAAR L will be an online testing program. ELLs not eligible to take STAAR L will take the regular STAAR tests but may be provided limited linguistic accommodations such as bilingual dictionaries.

For students eligible to take STAAR L, the following linguistic accommodations will be built into the online testing interface so that students can obtain needed language assistance in accordance with their English language proficiency level:

- Clarification—As students test, they will be able to click on words to see definitions, synonyms, and pictures as needed to improve comprehension. Content terms assessed will not be clickable. Providing these accommodations online eliminates the need for the current linguistic simplification guides and provides more test standardization than the current LAT process. Furthermore, it eliminates a drawback of the current LAT process in which students must ask the test administrator for assistance each time they encounter unfamiliar words in English. Based on educator comments, ELLs at lower proficiency levels are frequently reluctant to ask test administrators for as much language assistance as they might need. Another benefit of the computer-based approach is that a student testing online may refer back to clarified meanings by relicking on words at any time as they work through a test question or check over their work.
- Hearing individual words and phrases read aloud—Students may click on words, phrases, part of a test question, or an entire test question to hear eligible text read aloud. ELLs at lower proficiency levels have difficulty pronouncing English words and decoding them as they read because of phonological differences between their native language and English.

Other accommodations similar to those provided through the current LAT versions of TAKS may be added to the online system over time or made available outside the online system.

### ***Test Development Process***

The initial phases of test design and development are complete for the Spanish versions of STAAR. TEA will work with experts and practitioners in winter and spring of 2011 to finalize the linguistic accommodation plans for STAAR L, which may vary somewhat by grade level and subject area assessed. The final test development plan will specify the types of linguistic accommodations that will be allowable for STAAR and STAAR L and whether STAAR L versions will be available for all grades and subjects.

As with the English and Spanish versions of STAAR, educator committees will be convened to review the STAAR L accommodated versions as part of the STAAR test development process.

### ***Implementation Schedule for STAAR in Spanish and STAAR L***

The Spanish versions of STAAR for grades 3–5 will be implemented in spring 2012. A two-year phase-in period may be necessary to fully implement the computer-based versions of STAAR L; therefore, some of these assessments may be administered in a paper mode in 2012.

### ***Alignment of TELPAS with STAAR***

TELPAS results are used in a variety of state and federal accountability and performance-based monitoring indicators to ensure that K–12 ELLs make adequate annual progress in second language acquisition in the domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The current TELPAS assessments are aligned with the ELPS, which promote the development of academic English language proficiency across content areas. In focusing on the development of academic English, the ELPS support the academic achievement goals set forth in the content area TEKS. As the state transitions to the more rigorous STAAR program, TEA will examine the relationship of TELPAS to STAAR and make adjustments as needed to ensure a strong link between academic language proficiency as defined by TELPAS and academic achievement as defined by STAAR.

