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WHEN STANDARDIZED TESTS FAIL:  
ASSESSING ESL LITERACY LEARNERS IN CALIFORNIA

LISA GONZALVES  
*University of California, Davis*

**ABSTRACT:** In California, standardized language assessments are typically administered to adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students upon enrollment; students then take these same tests throughout the academic year to demonstrate progress. As these tests only assess listening and reading skills, schools often utilize their own agency-developed assessments to more accurately place students and subsequently to determine level promotion. Engaged in participatory action research, this study interviewed personnel at adult schools and learning centers, documenting the varying assessment policies and procedures employed at each facility, and highlighting the practices of ESL literacy instructors who devise their own measurements to track emerging literacy and oral language development in their students. This study underscores the discrepancies between the state's policies and actual pedagogical needs, and proposes ways to improve ESL assessment throughout the state.

**KEYWORDS:** literacy, adult learners, standardized testing, informal assessments, state assessment policy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every year over 200,000 adults in California enroll in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at their local adult school (California Department of Education and the California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2015: web). As California adult schools generally offer up to six levels of ESL instruction, ESL assessments are administered during initial registration to inform new students' language proficiency and level. Students are then given periodic assessments to indicate progress and determine level promotion. However, many adult schools take issue with the current standardized assessment options and may choose to supplement or substitute these tests with internally created assessments to determine students' language abilities.

The goal of this study is to document the various ways adult schools and adult education agencies 1) determine ESL level during initial assessment, 2) track academic gain, and 3) set policies regarding level promotion, as well as 4) note additional considerations for assessing ESL literacy-level learners. This study underscores the local, informal assessment measurements and practices conducted by education agencies.

## 2. BACKGROUND

U.S. adult schools (public education programs for adults 18+), are required to use assessment tests approved by National Reporting Services (NRS) to receive federal payment points for student gain. There are three main standardized test batteries approved by the NRS for adult ESL reporting: Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) Life and Work and Beginning Literacy assessments, BEST Literacy and BEST Plus 2.0, and TABE Complete Language Assessment System–English (TABE CLAS–E) (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2016: 19-21). CASAS, BEST and TABE CLAS-E are utilized not only for initial placement of new ESL students, but are also administered periodically to track student gains, which then inform level promotion.

The California Department of Education (CDE) has contracted with CASAS to collect and report all adult school data across the state since 1999 (CASAS, n.d -a: web). The CDE only accepts data measured by CASAS' Life and Work Reading and Listening series, as well as the Beginning Literacy Reading assessments. The CDE awards payment points to adult schools who can demonstrate student gain using these specific CASAS assessments (as well as EL Civics, which is not focused upon in this study). The source of such funds comes from Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (California Department of Education: web). Most adult schools receive the bulk of their funding from two sources – the Adult Education Block Grant, new monies (since 2015) meant to streamline adult education services between community colleges and adult schools, and the WIOA-based payment points, both which provide critical dollars to sustain adult education programs.

California adult schools can use any test they wish to assess their students; however, they will only receive funding for gains demonstrated using CASAS tests. While CASAS has developed additional oral and written assessments (the latter approved by the NRS), the CDE does not accept these measurements. By only accepting multiple-choice listening and reading tests, the student performance data does not provide a holistic profile of a student's linguistic proficiency.

Not only are these measurements limited in skill area, but there is concern regarding a lack of alignment between these standardized tests and classroom instruction (Van Horn, 1996: 15), (Askov et al., 1997: 68), (Menard-Warwick, 2009: 13-14). In California, there exist varying adult ESL standards from which schools may base their curriculum, including 1) the ESL Model Standards for Adult Education Programs, and 2) the new English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) for Adult Education, which correspond to 3) the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS); additionally, the CASAS tests are based on 4) the CASAS Competencies and CASAS Content Standards.

CASAS has developed content standards for five areas - Math, Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking- each with skills designated per level (CASAS, 2009). These exist side-by-side with the CASAS competencies, which include thematic areas such as

basic communication, health, community resources, employment, learning and thinking skills, and consumer economics (CASAS, 2008). The CASAS Life and Work and Beginning Literacy assessments, then, include both CASAS' standards and competencies. The CASAS Beginning Literacy Reading assessment (forms 27R and 28R) is the lowest level test available, and is appropriate for beginning ESL learners. Tasks on these assessments include a mix of literacy and life skills, such as matching upper case with lower case letters, matching a single word with an appropriate symbol (such as a women's restroom sign), or identifying U.S. currency.

In 2016, CASAS published new reading standards which will be reflected in a new test series (coming in 2018) which will be aligned with CCRS and the 2016 NRS Educational Functional Levels (CASAS, n.d.-b: web). Released in 2013, the CCRS emphasizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills necessary for academic and job place success (Pimentel, 2013: 1-2). However, the lowest level (Level A) is considered to span ESL Literacy through Beginning High (corresponding to grades K-1), and as such does not designate standards that are specific for ESL literacy students (Pimentel, 2013: 10). Correspondingly, the newly released ELPS are a set of 10 standards spanning five proficiency levels which highlight the language skills necessary for students to be successful in an academic-rich environment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education, 2016: 1-4).

Developed in 1992, the ESL Model Standards span 7 ESL levels, defining course content per the following categories for each level: accuracy, topics, culture, language skills, language functions, and language forms (California Department of Education, 1992: 21-39). Furthermore, these standards have an emphasis on life skills, covering topics such as medicine labels, banking, job ads, and housing. There is some level of overlap between the topics listed in the ESL Model Standards and the CASAS tests; for example, on CASAS test form 27R there are questions regarding personal information, time, numbers, and the calendar. However, the ESL Model Standards for literacy level students include topics such as family, cultural norms such as handshaking or waving, pragmatic skills such as showing gratitude, classroom commands such as "stand" and "sit," which are not included in the CASAS test battery. Furthermore, there is no mechanism for students to demonstrate level-appropriate writing skills incorporated in these same standards, such as copying and tracing. Conversely, the CASAS Beginning Literacy assessment includes items not included in ESL Model Standards, such as cursive writing, cooking measurements, and abbreviations.

In addition to issues of alignment, there is also the argument that standardized tests may not adequately assess students at the lowest ESL level (Wrigley & Guth, 1992: 135-136), (Burt & Keenan, 1995: n.p.), (Warriner, 2008: 315). It can take an extraordinary amount of time for an illiterate adult to gain literacy in a second language, and studies have shown it best to build oral skills first in to serve as the foundation for the forthcoming literacy skills (Croydon, 2005: 1), (Spiegel & Sunderland, 2006: 34). However, the approved adult ESL tests in California, which do not test speaking skills, fail to account for this critical oral language development. Furthermore, ESL literacy students may not yet possess the basic skills necessary to decode the current CASAS Beginning Literacy Assessment. Print tests alone are not an adequate measurement to document the multitude of gains made by such students as they pass through the various stages of acquiring literacy (Pettitt and Tarone, 2015: 35). Furthermore, for a true beginner, it can take an incredibly long time before having the ability to take a multiple-choice

test (Wrigley, 2001:4). Nonetheless, to gain federal benchmark dollars, a school has no option but to use the approved standardized tests.

It is common, then, for ESL practitioners to consider these standardized test results irrelevant given the test content and inadequacy to document student achievement (Askov et.al., 1997: 67), (Menard-Warwick 2009: 13-14). Consequently, many adult education agencies create their own informal tests to initially place students within their ESL program and to measure student gains throughout the academic year (Burt and Keenan, 1995: n.p.), (Askov et.al., 1997: 70), (Van Duzer & Berdan, 1999: n.p.). While informal assessments are incredibly under-researched, they provide a wealth of knowledge to the assessor and to the student themselves. Furthermore, the richness of using multiple measurements, including standardized tests as well as teacher observation and other demonstrations of language in context, provides a more comprehensive insight into a learner's proficiency (Shohamy, 2001: 389). However, school staff often lack the training required to develop reliable, valid test batteries, and as such their assessments may not capture what they intend to (Van Duzer & Berdan, 1999: n.p.). While such assessments provide critical insight into student performance, they must align to the standards, provide diagnostic information, be fair, and demonstrate technical quality, utility, and feasibility (Abedi, 2010: 185-188). Yet, without proper training and an agreement on what the standards are, each staff member is at risk of interpreting student work differently than their colleagues (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006: 221-2).

### 3. RESEARCH STUDY

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How is an adult ESL student's language level determined during initial intake and placement in California's adult schools?
2. What are the individual school policies for level promotion of adult ESL students?
3. What sorts of additional assessments have schools and instructors implemented to supplement standardized testing, and how much importance is given to these informal assessments vs. standardized testing?
4. What additional considerations are present when assessing and promoting adult ESL literacy level learners?

Applying a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, I utilized my existing community of adult education practitioners who shared their experiences at their respective sites. In Part I, interviews were conducted with 10 California adult school principals, vice-principals, assessment specialists, and ESL Coordinators at 8 different California adult schools. In Part II, 11 shorter interviews were conducted with ESL literacy teachers in California with regards to how they assess their learners. These interviews consisted of 8 ESL literacy level instructors at 6 adult schools (one who is also counted above in their role as ESL Coordinator), one instructor at a non-credit continuing education program, and two individuals from community based organizations who both held ESL instructional as well as administrative roles. It was a purposeful decision to include ESL literacy instructors at both adult schools as well as other adult learning facilities as adult ESL literacy students are particularly under-researched (Bigelow & Tarone,

2004: 689-690), (Tarone, 2010: 82). Furthermore, ESL literacy students initially often do not have the minimal skills required to take standardized tests, so it is imperative to document the alternative ways these instructors track their students' progress.

All interviews took place during the spring of 2016, and were conducted either face to face, via telephone, Skype, or email. The notes from the interviews were then analyzed for common themes, such as type of assessment task, skill area, opinion regarding formal vs. informal assessments, and suggestions for improvement locally or statewide.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICIES IN CALIFORNIA ADULT SCHOOLS

#### 4.1.1. Initial Placement

In California adult schools, initial ESL placement assessment systems tend to vary, using both standardized and informal measurements. Of the eight schools interviewed, only one school solely utilized agency-created tests to assess oral and writing proficiency; conversely, only two schools solely used CASAS tests and procedures to determine students' placement levels. The other five schools utilized a combination of agency-created and standardized assessments, including CASAS tests, structured/semi-structured/unstructured oral assessments or interviews, formal and informal writing samples, agency-created level tests, and other standardized tests, as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Type of Assessments Administered	# of Adult Schools
CASAS listening assessment only	1
CASAS dictation and CASAS oral interview script, along with CASAS reading and Math tests	1
Agency-created oral and written assessment only	1
Internal oral interview and writing prompt, other standardized tests and CASAS reading and listening test	1
Internal oral interview and writing prompt in addition to CASAS reading test	3
Agency-created listening and reading/grammar at the beginning of school year, and CASAS tests throughout rest of school year	1

Table 1: Determining Initial Placement Level

Type of Agency-Developed Assessment	# of Adult Schools
Oral	5
Written	5
Listening	1
Reading/grammar	1

Table 2: Agency-Developed Assessments Utilized During Initial Placement

The high usage of CASAS assessments is not surprising, as under current policy California adult schools receive payment points from the CDE when student gain is demonstrated. Nonetheless, it appears most participants felt the CASAS assessment alone was not an accurate method of determining ESL level. In all but one case, adult schools added their own agency-created assessments or, as was the case at one adult school, did not utilize the CASAS assessments at all. One interviewee specified that their internal ESL levels did not correlate with CASAS levels, and another stated that the classroom content did not match the content of the assessments. These agency-created initial placement assessments generally focused on active skills (speaking and writing) which, given that the CDE has only approved CASAS reading and listening assessments, seemed to be a clear display of supplementation.

#### 4.1.2. Accommodations for ESL Literacy Learners

Two sites aimed to locate incoming ESL literacy students early on during initial registration. One coordinator stated they intended to alleviate "anxiety" often felt by ESL literacy students going through the registration process. Another participant sought to avoid a situation in which an ESL literacy student was surrounded by a roomful of new students busily taking an assessment test, and might therefore feel uncomfortable to reveal their own inability to do the same in such a public setting. Both stated they identified such students by noticing who had difficulty filling out the initial registration form; one site employed a technique of approaching students waiting in line for registration, asking questions such as, "Zero English?" "No ABC?"

A few sites ensured that their agency-created assessments included level-appropriate tasks for ESL literacy learners. For example, one site designed a special writing assessment which included having literacy students write the alphabet, copy words, and respond to a picture prompt. Five sites implemented some sort of internally-created oral assessment in the form of an interview, which allowed ESL literacy learners to demonstrate their oral English proficiency.

#### 4.1.3. General Level Promotion Policies

There was no consistent policy regarding ESL level promotion among the schools interviewed. There were only two schools who solely used CASAS scores for promotion. Of these, one participant stated there was continual pressure from administrators to promote students whose CASAS reading scores indicated level promotion, even if their instructors insisted that the student was at or below level in other skill areas. At the other six sites, administrators understood that CASAS scores were but a single indicator of student level, and as such had developed or were developing more comprehensive methods of determining level promotion. Table 3 shows the varying ways in which an adult school facility decided to promote an adult ESL student to the next level. There was a strong preference towards teacher discretion to determine level promotion, being a single teacher's choice or some collective teacher process.

Criteria	# of Adult Schools
CASAS Score only	2
Teacher discretion only	2
Exit criteria collaboratively developed by teachers	2
Teachers meet once per quarter to discuss who should be promoted	1
Internal teacher-created level test scores in combination with EL Civics scores and other classroom assessments	1

Table 3: Determining Level Promotion – Administrator Responses

## 4.2. ASSESSMENT PRACTICES OF ESL LITERACY INSTRUCTORS IN CALIFORNIA

### 4.2.1. Use of CASAS Standardized Test Data

10 of the 11 ESL literacy instructors worked in schools which utilized CASAS tests. Of those 10 instructors, three stated they use CASAS competency reports as a general indication of subjects that need review, another three indicated they only used such data to confirm student progress, and one instructor said they used this data 'sparingly.' Three instructors did not use CASAS reports - one because they were not given such reports, and another because their community-based agency hand-scored CASAS tests and did not have access to competency reports.

### 4.2.2. Tracking Progress of ESL Literacy Learners

These same ESL literacy instructors were asked what assessments they perform in the classroom to measure student gain. While 10 out of 11 instructors mentioned general observation of students in-class, overall there was no consistent method used. Table 4 shows the varying responses, which include both formative (speaking with ease, homework assignments, daily journal) as well as summative (textbook unit tests, EL Civics objectives) assessments.

Skill Area	Assessment Type	# of Instructors
ALL	General observation of students in-class	10
	EL Civics	2
	Level checklist or gradebook	1
	Agency-created pre- and post-tests	1
	Results from ESL software program	1
Writing/Listening	Spelling tests/dictation	3

Skill Area	Assessment Type	# of Instructors
Writing	Copying correctly	1
	Teacher-created writing assessment	1
	Daily writing journal	1
	Portfolio of student work	1
Reading/Writing	Correcting homework/handouts	4
	General quizzes	1
	Textbook unit test	1
Reading/Speaking	Can read aloud	1
Speaking	Pronunciation	1
	Speaking with ease	2
	Periodic audio-recording of students	1
Speaking/Listening	Teacher-created oral assessment	1
	Conversation task	1
	Asking/answering questions	1
Listening	General comprehension	2
	No assessments at this level	1

Table 4: Tracking Student Progress in the Classroom – Instructor Responses

Aside from ‘general observation’ of student performance, we see few overlapping responses. However, when grouped by skill area, we observe a greater focus on writing (8 responses) and speaking (7 responses) performance.

#### 4.2.3. Promotion Policies for ESL Literacy Students

Earlier results indicated that adult school administrators, assessment specialists and ESL coordinators overwhelmingly favored teacher discretion in determining ESL level promotion. Correspondingly, six ESL literacy instructors stated they had the authority to decide when their students were promoted. The others either taught a multilevel class (where promotion did not occur), worked at a facility where CASAS scores exclusively warranted promotion, or simply did not provide a response. Table 5 highlights responses from the instructors who held the authority to determine student promotion, and the subjective and/or objective criteria they used.

<p>“Nothing formal. My gut based on observation, I guess. When a student is quickly finishing written work, seems to understand most of what I am saying, is leaning over to help the student next to him/her, is translating what I am saying for another student - it's time to go!”</p>
<p>“There is no fixed metric...when their oral English skills (and even their written English) improves to a certain point we can't keep them stuck in a class where they are learning numbers and “mother/father/brother sister” all the time.”</p>
<p>Course completion requirements, including: 80% average score on unit tests and spelling tests; 70% minimum score on writing assessment – teacher's use a rubric; minimum CASAS score of 185; EL Civics objective pass or other speaking assessment). “It is often clear when a student is ready (e.g. finishes work quickly, knows all the answers).”</p>
<p>“Students are promoted if they can:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand and follow basic oral instructions in English (for example: Stand up. Point to the chair.)</li> <li>2. Answer questions with “Yes” or “No” about topics studied in class.</li> <li>3. Answer personal questions in English.</li> <li>4. Ask basic questions practiced in class.</li> <li>5. Read and write numbers and letters in English.</li> <li>6. Read, copy, and write some words in English.</li> <li>7. Write 15 or more words in one minute.</li> <li>8. Complete a simple form with personal information.</li> </ol> <p>In addition, some grasp of personal pronouns and the verb To Be. Pronunciation is adequate enough to be understood.”</p>
<p>“When the student finishes each task quickly and looks around, when the student asks me in English to go to another level and explains why, when the student show self-confidence and helps other students who are struggling, when the student writes with speed and clarity, when the student is able to ask and answer questions quickly demonstrating comprehension, when the student uses the material learned in the classroom.”</p>
<p>“When I consider advancing students I evaluate on their classroom performance, confidence...they usually respond... If they have a good grasp of the language, understand readily, do consistently well on spelling tests and worksheets, and have an appropriate casas score then I confirm they are ready to advance.”</p>

Table 5: Personal Responses Regarding Level Promotion of Literacy Students

We can see a few overlapping themes in their answers, such as a student's demonstration of speed and comprehension. Once again there was an emphasis on active skills; writing and speaking performance far dominated in the interviewees' answers. Spelling tests, writing assessments, speaking assessments, asking and answering questions, pronunciation, and copying were common themes. Furthermore, there was mention of less measurable criteria, such as a student displaying confidence and helping others.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

California provides adults schools with much autonomy with regards to classroom instruction. There is no federal pressure over which standards to use, and no state con-

trolled curriculum. Given this freedom, schools and instructors may choose to create their own internal assessment measures and systems to supplement standardized assessments. However, collectively there is a lack of continuity in our assessment procedures, as well as concern regarding the validity of our methods. Taking the results of this study into account, what follows is a summary of recommendations.

### 5.1 MORE COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS FOR PLACEMENT AND TRACKING STUDENT GROWTH

In this study, most of the schools invested funds to develop their own internal assessment measures to obtain a more comprehensive representation of the student's ESL level, emphasizing that standardized tests alone did not provide enough of a holistic student profile. These agency-created measurements were used to inform initial ESL placement as well as determine when a student's performance merits level promotion. Given that the CDE has only approved CASAS reading and listening tests, it is suggested that adult schools be allowed to use speaking and writing assessments as an additional option, to provide a more complete picture of a student's language ability. This would allow schools to measure students' abilities and growth in all skill areas, in accordance with either the ESL Model Standards, the CASAS Competencies and Content Standards, CCRS, and/or ELPS. Furthermore, since ESL literacy level students often do not possess the basic skills necessary to take the CASAS reading or listening tests, the schools would benefit from some way to document students' verbal and written gains as they progress through the various stages of English oral proficiency and literacy acquisition. As such, instead of the current one- or two-skill assessment approach, a focus on multi-skill assessments is encouraged.

One option is to use existing CASAS writing and speaking assessments. Additionally, alternative assessments could be developed that are in alignment with the content standards for ESL literacy, such as documenting the ability to trace and copy (writing skills), tracking phonemic decoding skills in oral reading tasks, or responding to basic conversation dialogues. Ideally, these additional assessments would also be approved by the CDE to formally recognize the student's achievements in these crucial skill areas. To approve such tests should not imply that these tests are mandated; instead, it would simply provide a formal mechanism to evaluate student growth if desired.

### 5.2. TRAINING FOR PRACTITIONERS ON QUANTIFYING PROGRESS IN THE ESL LITERACY CLASSROOM

Calls have been made for our field to develop adequate and uniform assessment measures for literacy learners (Wrigley, 2001: 5) and students deserve to demonstrate their progress via quantifiable, incremental measurements beyond the personal observation of the instructor. In this study, one instructor mentioned students finishing tasks 'quickly.' But what does 'quickly' signify, and how can we mutually agree on this term? For example, one ESL literacy instructor in this study expected their student to be able 'to write 15 words per minute.' By replacing the term 'quickly' with a quantifiable measurement (ie, 15 words), student performance can now be measured and shared, as opposed to simply being subjectively determined. Other instructors mentioned assessments which were quantifiable, such as periodic audio-recordings to track oral progress (tracking lexical

and syntactic gains, for example), or maintaining student portfolios to compare student writing improvements (length, penmanship, grammar, etc). By quantifying expectations of student performance, we then provide tangible goals to the student while documenting calculable gains. Therefore, practitioners would benefit from a training on how to quantify their informal evaluations of students. These measurements can then be shared with the student, the administrator, and across agencies, thereby enriching our current bank of assessment tools throughout our region.

## 6. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this study, 20 individuals representing many facets of adult education in California discussed issues of adult ESL assessments; however, this represents an extremely small portion of all adult schools and adult education centers in the state of California. It would be of great benefit to expand this study to include a larger number of participants, allowing for more comprehensive data. Furthermore, the conversation must be taken beyond the simplistic four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) framework and discuss where pragmatics, pronunciation, and other "real" language skills fall into the assessment conversation. While limited, I hope the findings from this study provide useful insight into adult second language assessment.

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