

Evidence Base on Assessment Accommodations for English Learners

This brief summarizes the findings of a 2010-2018 literature review on assessment accommodations conducted by the Improving Instruction for English Learners through Improved Accessibility Decisions project. The complete literature review, including the full list of 11 included studies, is available here: [A Summary of the Research on Test Accommodations for English Learners and English Learners with Disabilities 2010-2018.](#)

Why was this literature review done?

To choose the most beneficial accommodations for an individual student who is an English learner, educators and policymakers need access to research findings on the effectiveness of those accommodations for this population of students.

The literature review summarizes research literature on English learner accommodations published from 2010 to 2018. It gives attention to studies that:

- provide new information on frequently studied accommodations such as simplified English or the use of English dictionaries or glossaries,
- address innovative accommodation types, or
- examine the role of student characteristics on the effectiveness of accommodations.

Each of these areas had previously been identified as gaps in the literature.

How did the recent literature address the previously identified research gaps?

Research on Simplified English and English Glossaries

Simplified English and English glossaries are among the most commonly studied accommodations. Four studies of simplified English did not show a consistent effect on students' test scores. Two of them found that all English learners' test scores increased when they used a linguistically simplified test, while two others found that a linguistically simplified test had mixed, or no, effect on test scores. Three studies of English glossaries provided limited data on effectiveness. In one study, few students used the glossary that was available to them, and in another study, the researchers looked at patterns of student accommodation use without examining improvement in student outcomes.

Studies on Innovative Accommodations

The 2010-2018 literature looked at three new types of innovative accommodations: a hybrid English-Spanish assessment, with Spanish translations available for English learners who got the English item wrong; a sticker paraphrasing tool that allowed students to cover difficult text with simpler, paraphrased text; and illustrations designed to enhance text comprehension. Of these three, only the Spanish-enhanced English assessment for Spanish-speaking English learners demonstrated positive test score gains for students who used it. The literature also looked at some new forms of traditional accommodations, such as pop-up glossaries for computerized tests, but limited data were provided to determine their effectiveness.



Effectiveness of Accommodations by Student Characteristics

Only three studies looked at the relationship between accommodations and individual student characteristics such as English proficiency level or native language background. These studies emphasized that not every student used, or benefited from, the same accommodation. One study found that all participating Spanish-speaking English learners benefited from a Spanish translation of an English assessment, but those with the lowest English proficiency saw the highest gains in test scores. Another study found that English learners with mid-level English proficiency used a pop-up glossary and a sticker-paraphrasing tool more often than those with higher proficiency. A third study found that students' prior math achievement scores had a stronger relationship to their performance on a math assessment than did the use of an English glossary accommodation.

Which studies had the strongest evidence for English learners?

Overall, there were mixed findings on the effectiveness of accommodations for English learners. Studies were fairly consistent on the effectiveness of Spanish translations and simplified English. Two studies of Spanish translations, one study of simplified English, and one study that combined simplified English and a Spanish translation found that these accommodations improved the performance of all English learners who used them. The majority of other studies either had mixed results or showed no improvement in test scores when an accommodation was used. Researchers stated that the students did not necessarily use an accommodation that they were offered, the students lacked prerequisite skills to answer the test item correctly even with an accommodation, or the test items were too difficult.

Cautions

Assessment accommodations for English learners are intended to help educators make valid inferences about what a student knows and can do by minimizing the barriers of students' developing English skills. The research literature often looks for increases in test scores as a sign that an accommodation is "working" for a student. However, it is possible that an English learner benefits from using an accommodation even though a test score does not increase. For example, if an English learner uses simplified English on a math test and gets a low test score, it is possible that the accommodation worked well and simply demonstrated that the student did not know the math content. In this case, the student likely needs additional instruction.

Take-Aways

There continues to be a need for research on simplified English and English glossaries, innovative accommodations, and the effectiveness of accommodations by student characteristics. Despite this need for further research, the recent literature shows that accommodations decisions for English learners need to be individualized. Not every student benefits from, or uses, an assigned accommodation. In this review, the strongest evidence supports the use of simplified English and Spanish translations of assessments for those who have the necessary Spanish language skills.

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