
Developments in ESOL K-12 Student and Teacher Assessments: Reflecting on Steps Forward and Backward Since 2013

Beth Clark-Gareca*

State University of New York at Binghamton

Assessment within the field of TESOL K-12 has evolved considerably over the last 10 years for multilingual learners (MLLs) and their teachers in U.S. public schools. This retrospective piece documents changes in the assessment landscape related to *student* English language proficiency (ELP) assessments, i.e., WIDA and the New York-specific NYSITELL and NYSESLAT tests, as well as the *teacher* certification examination, Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), specifically in English as an Additional Language. In honor of *NYS TESOL Journal's* 10th anniversary, this article highlights some of the field's steps forward and backward in K-12 TESOL assessment over the last decade and closes with reasons for both optimism and concern in the years to come.

Keywords: TESOL K-12, Assessment, NYSITELL, NYSESLAT, edTPA

Assessment within the field of TESOL K-12 has evolved significantly in the last 10 years, particularly in changes to the tests used to evaluate multilingual learners (MLLs) and their teachers in public schools. As a researcher and teacher educator focused on K-12 student and teacher assessments, I have written about the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher certification assessment (see Clark-Gareca, 2015, 2022), as well the NYSITELL and NYSESLAT English proficiency tests designed for MLLs in New York (Clark-Gareca, 2016). Revisiting this work for *NYS TESOL Journal's* 10th anniversary, it has been enlightening for me to reflect on the steps taken forward and backward in our state's development of K-12 assessment practices and protocols for MLLs and ESOL teachers. In this article, I look specifically at the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners (NYSITELL), the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), and the edTPA then and now, and offer a few recommendations and cautions regarding next steps in the future of TESOL K-12 assessments in New York State.

To give some historical context, in 2013, educational practices for MLLs were still strongly under the influence of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and later, under the effect of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) which continues to hold educational sway today. Both acts are credited (or blamed, as the case may be) for introducing a new age of accountability into U.S. schools, which, in turn, has resulted in a veritable surge of energy, attention, and financial resources invested in the standardized testing industry.

Rising to the English language assessment mandates that NCLB and ESSA ushered in, WIDA came on the scene in 2003, back when the W, D, and A referred to its first

* bclarkgareca@binghamton.edu

member states - Wisconsin, Delaware, and Arkansas ("Mission and History," n.d., WIDA). As of this writing, WIDA's newly updated standards have been released (WIDA Consortium, 2020) and the associated aligned assessments have been adopted for use in 36 states, the District of Columbia, and five additional territories and agencies ("WIDA Consortium Regions," n.d.). Undeniably, WIDA's ACCESS for ELLs assessment has become the go-to English proficiency measure for U.S. school districts required to regularly report MLLs' English language gains and/or losses.

Despite the widespread adoption of WIDA standards and associated assessments, New York has persisted in retaining its own New York-specific proficiency measures. Ten years ago, MLL English proficiency in New York was measured by the LAB-R test which was replaced by NYSITELL and NYSESLAT in February 2014 (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2014); the latter two tests are currently in use today. The idea of pivoting away from NYSITELL/NYSESLAT to another proficiency test suite was explored recently by the New York State Education Department (Villareal de Adler, 2021), but new communications suggest that NYSESLAT testing will continue and will include computer-based testing protocols as early as the spring 2024 testing cycle (Warner, 2022). Another interesting development is that the contract for NYSESLAT/NYSITELL testing has recently and somewhat contentiously moved from MetriTech to Pearson (State of New York Office of the Comptroller, 2022), which likely indicates that other changes in test delivery and design are in the works. Despite NYSESLAT and NYSITELL being central to the work of New York ESOL teachers, my classroom observations and interactions with educators suggest that WIDA ACCESS materials, particularly the Can-do statements, are very much in use in New York classrooms despite not being formally aligned to New York State Standards or the New York tests in general.

As for teacher assessments, the last 10 years have marked noteworthy changes in the ESOL certification landscape. EdTPA, a teacher performance assessment, was formally rolled out in various states in 2013-2014 to measure new teachers' readiness for K-12 classrooms. By having student teachers videorecord their lessons and analyze real student work, edTPA was and continues to be heralded as an "objective and trustworthy process to evaluate the performance of aspiring teachers" (About edTPA, 2021). Arguably, edTPA has provided a refreshing and seemingly more authentic departure from other primarily multiple-choice tests required for teacher certification.

When edTPA was first introduced in New York in 2013, it was immediately made a certification requirement, unlike in many other states where it was adopted. Right away, pass/fail cut scores were set and adhered to by the state to determine whether a student teacher's submitted portfolio demonstrated sufficient mastery to warrant certification (Clark-Gareca, 2016). Unsurprisingly, this was a chaotic time in TESOL K-12 teacher preparation programs as teacher educators scrambled to learn the assessment themselves to be better positioned to help candidates navigate this new requirement. Over time, edTPA preparation has become a primary focus in many student teaching programs, and edTPA evaluation criteria and rubrics have functioned as an important guide for what is valued in novice teacher performance (Clark-Gareca, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic inadvertently provided momentum for changes in teacher certification assessments. School closures during that time made student teaching, and subsequently, the completion of edTPA very difficult, and NYSED, along with other state departments of education, wisely paused submission requirements. Teacher educators anxiously watched and waited, and in April 2022, it was announced that edTPA as a certification requirement in New York State had been eliminated entirely (NYSED, 2022). By and large, student teachers have expressed relief at this development, but some teacher educators have expressed concern about the removal of baseline, professional requirements for becoming an ESOL teacher (Clark-Gareca, 2022). In the absence of edTPA, schools of education are now tasked with creating locally administered and rated assessments, which

will add significant variability to the tested and expected skills needed to become a New York ESOL teacher.

As for the future of student assessments, language proficiency assessment is always in a state of flux as educational and political systems move forward, go backward, and move forward again. Though NCLB and ESSA have been, and continue to be, controversial, they have arguably resulted in much clearer tracking of MLLs as an aggregate group on the U.S. educational map (Wright, 2015). Following from NCLB, New York's Commissioner's Report 154 has supported stronger mandates for MLL identification, proficiency progress, required minutes of instruction, and teacher professional development (NYSED 2014, 2015a, 2015b), which has led to significant, codified progress that I believe is cause for optimism. With these regulations has come a newfound evidence-based understanding of the academic realities of MLLs, and even if that news is not always good, there is reason to hope that more equitable access to appropriate instruction will come as a result. It is also possible that with the changing of hands of the NYSITELL/NYSESLAT tests, more resources will be invested in developing more WIDA-like, teacher-friendly tools, and one can only hope that the long-awaited, alternate assessment designed for MLLs in special education will finally be developed.

As for the future of teacher assessments, the ongoing, statewide need for teachers is a primary driver in deciding how stringent or lax certification requirements can be. It is plausible that with the removal of the New York edTPA requirement, we will see a resurgence of potential teachers coming into our education programs, but as a community of practitioners and researchers, we must be careful – the easiest and most direct way to alleviate a teacher shortage is to eliminate or reduce core requirements, e.g., completion of a TESOL teacher preparation program, student teaching hours, or certification assessments. As a general rule, many of us are opposed to the idea of gatekeeping, but are we really prepared to staff our ESOL classrooms with applicants who may not have met a basic standard of teaching? And perhaps more importantly, do the tests that we have in place now ensure that our teachers have the knowledge and skills to adequately teach our MLLs? Going forward, it is incumbent upon us to take note if more teacher assessments disappear and to be mindful of the consequences of these actions. Perhaps some educational gatekeeping will be required to preserve and maintain the expertise of our teachers and, more broadly, the integrity of the profession. As faculty in schools of education begin to create their plans for edTPA replacements, the field will need to take great care to safeguard a new minimum standard, whatever that may be, for what it takes to be an ESOL teacher.

Beth Clark-Gareca holds a Ph.D. in TESOL from New York University and is an associate professor and the director of TESOL K-12 programs at SUNY Binghamton.

References

- About edTPA. (2021, December 15) *Goals and outcomes*. <https://edtpa.org/about>.
- Clark-Gareca, B. (2015). Where practicum meets test preparation: Supporting teacher candidates through edTPA. *CATESOL Journal*, 27(2), 211-220.
- Clark-Gareca, B. (2016). Pressure to pass: NYSITELL and NYSESLAT tests. *NYSTESOL Journal*, 3(1), 35-41.
- Clark-Gareca, B. (2022). Evolving the TESOL practicum: Revisiting the impact of edTPA. In P. Chang & W. Wright (Eds.), *Innovating the Practicum in TESOL Teacher Education: Design, Implementation, and Pedagogy in an Era of Change* (pp. 64-76). Routledge.
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301
(2015). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/1/text>
- New York State Education Department. (2014). Services for pupils with limited English proficiency Subpart 154-1.
<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/bilingual-ed/terms-154-1-effective-through-2014-15.pdf>
- New York State Education Department. (2015a). Commissioner's Report subpart 154-2: Services for English Language Learners for programs operated in the 2015-16 school year and thereafter. <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/bilingual-ed/terms-154-2-effective-2015-16-and-after.pdf>
- New York State Education Department. (2015b). SED presents recommendations to Board of Regents to revise Commissioner's Regulations Part 154.
<http://www.nysed.gov/news/2015/sed-presents-recommendations-board-regents-revise-commissioners-regulations-part-154>
- New York State Education Department. (2022). NYSED former edTPA certification requirement.
<https://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/certexamstedtpa.html#:~:text=At%20its%20April%202022%20meeting,as%20of%20April%2027%2C%202022>
- State of New York Office of the Comptroller. (2022, October 6). In the Matter of the Appeal filed by MetriTech, Inc. with respect to the procurement of services to develop and administer statewide English language proficiency assessments conducted by the New York State Education Department.
http://www1.osc.state.ny.us/Contracts/Bid_Protest/bpd_SF20220030.pdf
- Villareal de Adler, N. (2021, February 5). Recommendations by New York State English Language Proficiency Assessment Advisory Committee. New York State Association of Bilingual Education. <https://www.nysabe.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/NYS-English-Language-Proficiency-Assessment-Advisory-Committee-Recommendations-FINAL.pdf>
- Warner, Z. (2022, October) Delay in the Transition of New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) to Computer-Based Testing.
<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/state-assessment/nyseslat-cbt-transition-delay.pdf>
- WIDA Consortium. (2020). *WIDA English language development standards framework, 2020 edition*. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.
<https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/WIDA-ELD-Standards-Framework-2020.pdf>
- WIDA Consortium (n.d.). *WIDA consortium members*.
<https://wida.wisc.edu/memberships/consortium>
- WIDA Consortium (n.d.). *Mission and history*. <https://wida.wisc.edu/about/mission-history>

Wright, W. (2015). *Foundations for teaching English learners: Research, theory, policy, and practice*. Caslon.

