TEST REVIEW: WIDA SCREENER

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of multilingual students in U.S. schools from kindergarten to Grade 12. This trend is expected to continue, with projections suggesting that 40% of all students could come from families where English is not the first language (Fu, 2009; Kim et al., 2018). To support these multilingual learners and their educators, the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium and the Center for Applied Linguistics have developed the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs). This is a comprehensive, standards-based English language proficiency test. Additionally, the WIDA Screener, which is available in both paper and online formats, serves as a shorter version of ACCESS for K-12 English Language Learners (ELLs). My review will focus exclusively on the WIDA Screener Online, considering its practicality, usability, and validity. By evaluating the WIDA Screener, particularly its online version, I aim to substantiate its effectiveness. This, in turn, will illustrate how it can be a valuable resource for both students and educators.

TEST REVIEW

Test Purpose

The WIDA Screener is an English language proficiency assessment specifically designed for newly enrolled students in grades K-12. Unlike ACCESS, which is used for both placement and achievement evaluation, the WIDA Screener focuses solely on the identification and placement of ELLs. While it offers a more streamlined approach compared to ACCESS, the Screener plays a crucial role in helping educators determine whether a new student requires additional language support.

WIDA has developed a set of English Language Development (ELD) standards aimed at promoting equity for multilingual learners in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These standards address several key areas. The Social Instructional Language standard evaluates the ability to use English in social contexts and for instructional purposes, such as following directions and engaging in classroom discussions. The Language of Language Arts standard focuses on skills related to language arts, including reading comprehension, writing, and literary analysis. The Language of Math emphasizes understanding and communicating mathematical concepts, as well as reasoning and problem-solving. The Language of Science assesses language skills necessary for interacting with scientific content, including experiment descriptions and scientific discussions. Lastly, the Language of Social Studies standard gauges language proficiency in social studies topics, covering historical texts, geographical concepts, and civics and economics discussions. These diverse standards reflect WIDA's holistic approach to language development, addressing both academic and social language skills that are vital for the progress of multilingual learners (Wida Consortium, 2020).

While the WIDA Screener aligns with the WIDA ELD Standards, it primarily assesses general language proficiency, rather than directly evaluating language skills in each specific academic content area (Macgregor & Sahakyan, 2020). The ELD Standards provide a framework for English language instruction and guide curriculum development and instructional practices across various content areas. Although integral to WIDA's philosophy, these standards play a more significant role in ongoing instruction and formative assessments within classrooms, rather than in initial placement assessments like the WIDA Screener (Wida Consortium, 2020).

Nonetheless, by incorporating these varied standards, the WIDA Screener ensures a comprehensive assessment of a student's English language proficiency, addressing both academic and social language skills crucial for determining the appropriate level of language support needed.

Test Method

The WIDA Screener is divided into five grade-level clusters: 1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Each cluster includes four test sections: Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing. The Listening and Reading sections feature an adaptive testing design with three groups of test items. Students initially encounter a set of items, and their performance on these determines whether they are directed to an easier or more challenging group of items, as depicted in Figure 1. This adaptive mechanism ensures a tailored assessment experience, reflecting each student's English proficiency level.

Figure 1
Overview of the Test Design of Screener Online. Adapted from "Examining the relationship between the WIDA Screener and ACCESS for ELLs assessments," by D. Macgregor and N. Sahakyan, 2020, in WIDA Technical Report (p.5).
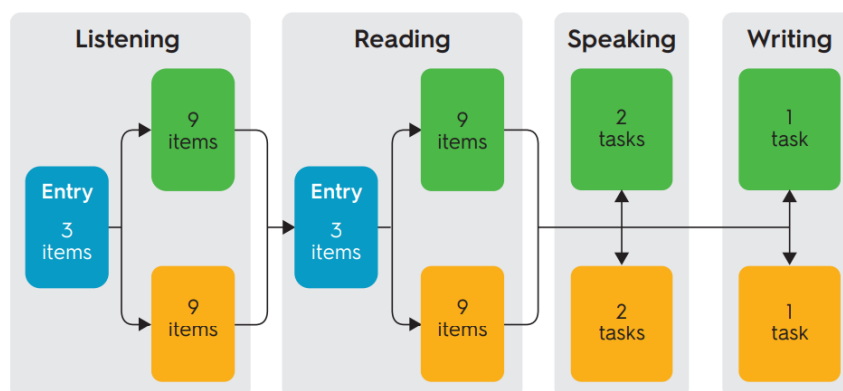
The tasks' level in the Speaking and Writing sections is determined by the student's scale scores on the Listening and Reading tests (Macgregor & Sahakyan, 2020). This approach maintains a consistent difficulty level across all test sections, based on the student's demonstrated language skills. The entire Screener Online test is flexible in scheduling, with a total test duration of about 80 minutes. The Reading and Listening sections are allocated 15 minutes each, while the Speaking and Writing sections are given a longer duration of 25 minutes each, considering the different complexities of these skills.

Furthermore, WIDA offers teachers and decision-makers access to a test demo and a practice test through a portal link (available via WIDA customer service). These resources

provide step-by-step simulations with model answers for each test item. For example, in a speaking task simulation, a teacher on a computer screen interacts with a student, demonstrating what is expected in a student's response (see Appendix A). Additionally, the screener evaluates language proficiency in subject matter contexts. Some items are specifically designed to assess classroom language skills for content-based learning, like a listening item that combines understanding reading graphs with listening comprehension (see Appendix B).

The WIDA Screener Interpretive Guide for Score Reports outlines the scoring and calculation of test items. Listening and Reading scores are computed automatically online, producing raw scores based on the number of correct items. For the Speaking and Writing tests, assessments are conducted by local school or district staff, referred to as 'local raters,' using the WIDA Screener Scoring Scales. Once the speaking and writing scores are entered into the WIDA Assessment Management System, the system generates speaking and writing scores as well as composite scores.

Scores

According to the WIDA Screener Interpretive Guide for Score Reports, the scoring process involves converting raw scores into scale scores using statistical methods to account for varying test difficulties. To facilitate easier interpretation, these scale scores are then translated into proficiency levels. The reports provide proficiency level scores for each language domain (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) and three composite scores: Oral Language, Literacy, and Overall. The Oral Language score is calculated as the average of the Listening and Speaking scores, while the Literacy score is the average of the Reading and Writing scores. For the Overall score, a weighted average of all four domain scores is computed, with Listening and Speaking each contributing 15%, and Reading and Writing contributing 35% each. This weighting reflects the relative importance of each skill in overall language proficiency.

The same proficiency level cut scores are applied in both the WIDA Screener and ACCESS for ELLs. These cut scores delineate the boundaries between proficiency levels and are defined for each grade based on expert judgments during a standard-setting process. To assist parents in understanding their children's proficiency levels, scores are aligned with the six WIDA English language proficiency levels: Entering, Emerging, Developing, Expanding,

Bridging, and Reaching, where 'Entering' is the initial level, and 'Reaching' is the highest achievable level.

While ACCESS is primarily a criterion-referenced test, focusing on assessing ELL students' achievement against set standards, the Screener incorporates aspects of both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing. Its norm-referenced nature is evident in its use for initial placement decisions (Brown, 2005), assessing general language proficiency among ELL students. However, it also functions as a criterion-referenced test, with proficiency levels based on the WIDA standards serving as criteria. Thus, each proficiency level acts as a criterion to determine students' language proficiency status.

Cost and Publisher

The WIDA Screener is available free of charge, offering a significant advantage to members of the WIDA consortium. This accessibility enables schools and educators to use the assessment tool flexibly throughout the year, without financial constraints. WIDA is situated within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For any inquiries or additional support, the WIDA Client Services Center can be reached via email or phone, providing users with ready assistance.

Moreover, the WIDA website is an encompassing resource for information regarding the Screener and other related tools. The website, which can be accessed at http://wida.wisc.edu, is designed to be user-friendly and informative, making it easier for educators and decision-makers to navigate and efficiently find necessary information.

Validity

Substantial evidence supporting the reliability of ACCESS has been documented in numerous reports. This includes detailed information on the assessment's conceptualization and the procedures for standard-setting. One notable aspect is the conversion of grade-level cluster cut scores to grade-specific scores, which has been demonstrated to have high reliability rates for composite scores (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011). A more recent Technical Report by Macgregor & Sahakyan (2020) further strengthens this evidence by examining the relationship between the WIDA Screener and the ACCESS for ELLs assessment. The study found significant correlations

between the overall composite scale scores of the Screener and ACCESS across all grades, with correlations ranging from 0.67 for Grade 1 to a high of 0.86 for Grades 7-9. This indicates a strong alignment between the two assessments, underscoring the Screener's validity.

Furthermore, the Screener's proficiency score has been identified as a critical factor in making identification and placement decisions for students (Kim et al., 2018). This highlights the Screener's practical value, especially in scenarios where new students from diverse backgrounds need to be quickly and accurately identified as ELLs and placed in appropriate language support programs. The fact that the Screener is freely available to states and territories enrolled in the WIDA Consortium and can be accessed virtually anytime enhances its practicality. Its relatively shorter duration, requiring about 80 minutes as opposed to the 265 minutes needed for ACCESS, facilitates a more efficient assessment process. This efficiency is particularly valuable for schools in managing and identifying the language proficiency status of new students. Moreover, WIDA provides extensive support and guidelines for teachers and administrators on their website, including resources like 'suggested sample item scripts', 'interpretive guides for score reports', and various workshops, further cementing the Screener's role as a vital tool in the educational landscape.

Areas for Improvement

The WIDA Screener Online provides proficiency scores across different domains, but as presented in Appendix C, the score report lacks detailed explanations regarding an ELL student's practical English usage. While an interpretive guide for score reports is available, it does not sufficiently clarify a student's proficiency in practical terms. For instance, terms like 'Bridging' and 'Expanding' in WIDA proficiency levels are not immediately clear, leaving parents and educators uncertain about the specific language skills their students have or need. Questions like whether a child needs more vocabulary development or whether they can understand narrative stories but struggle with academic writing remain unanswered. This lack of detail makes it challenging to fully understand a child's language proficiency.

Furthermore, in the context of ELL placements, there is a lack of specific guidelines on how to use and integrate Screener scores with other data sources. For instance, the process of incorporating ACCESS scores, Screener results, home language surveys, or parent interviews in

the decision-making process at the school or district level is not clearly outlined, as noted by Kim et al. (2018). This ambiguity raises concerns about the effectiveness of the Screener as a standalone measurement tool. In practice, combining Screener scores with these additional data sources could offer a more comprehensive understanding of a student's English language proficiency and needs. However, without clear guidance on integrating these different sources, educators may struggle to make well-informed placement decisions. Conducting thorough studies on this matter would be beneficial for future research, potentially leading to more structured guidelines for integrating various assessment tools and data in ELL placements.

Additionally, the accessibility of the Screener poses a limitation. While it is freely available to WIDA Consortium members, educators and students in non-member states are excluded from using this resource. This restriction is particularly problematic for states with fewer ELLs, where funding for such assessments might not be prioritized. Denying access to non-members seems neither equitable nor educationally sound. Offering the Screener, even for a fee, to non-member states would be a more inclusive approach. Also, providing additional or differentiated assessment materials for member states with smaller ELL populations would ensure appropriate support (Kim et al., 2018).

The need for a more transparent and comprehensive approach to interpreting Screener results, coupled with the accessibility issue, highlights areas for improvement. Addressing these concerns could significantly enhance the utility and fairness of the WIDA Screener in the assessment and placement of ELL students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the process of ELL identification and placement involves considering a myriad of factors, including student English language proficiency scores, home language surveys, academic achievements, and parent interviews. The WIDA Screener has been established as a reliable tool in this context, demonstrating a high correlation with ACCESS and serving as a robust predictive source for ELL identification and placement (Kim et al., 2018; Macgregor & Sahakyan, 2020). However, the WIDA Consortium cautions against relying solely on the Screener for making these critical decisions. This recommendation underscores the

complexity of language learning and the necessity of a holistic approach to the educational decision-making process.

Furthermore, it is emphasized that those responsible for ELL identification and placement should possess a deep understanding of second language acquisition and teaching practices. This is particularly crucial given that these decisions are often made by a single individual or a small group of educators, which can limit the diversity of perspectives in the decision-making process (Kim et al., 2018).

Despite these considerations and the need for a multifaceted approach, the WIDA Screener Online stands as a validated and valuable instrument. Its expanding use is a testament to its effectiveness in aiding educators and decision-makers. Moving forward, it is essential to continue refining and supplementing this tool with additional resources and training for educators. This will ensure that it not only remains a robust instrument for assessment but also becomes an integral part of a comprehensive strategy for effectively supporting the diverse needs of ELL students.

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APPENDIX A

Speaking Directions

This is Nina. I will ask Nina questions too. Her answers are examples. They will help you know how to answer my questions.

Speaking Directions

Nina, what grade are you in?

Speaking Practice   ▶ Play

Now it's your turn.

Tell me, what grade are you in?

● Record   ■ Stop

⚙ Pause Test ?   ✎ 🔍 Line Guide   Next ➤

Appendix B. WIDA Screener Practice Test Listening Section

(Retrieved from WIDA secure portal)

Appendix C. WIDA Screener Online Score Report

(Retrieved from WIDA Screener Interpretive Guide for Score Reports)

WIDA Screener Online Score Report

WIDA

WIDA Screener Online

Score Report

Test Date: 09/29/2021   Test Administrator/Scorer:

Student Information

First Name: Student   Last Name: Name 4
Birthdate: 05/05/2011   Current Grade: 05
State ID: 3456546880   School: WIDA Demo School 1
District: WIDA Demo District 1   State: ST
Home Language(s):

This report provides information about the student's scores on the WIDA Screener Online. The assessment is designed to provide a snapshot of an English language learner's general English language proficiency. This test is based on the WIDA English Language Development Standards and is used as one criterion to determine a student's eligibility for English language services. Please refer to state policy for making decisions about a student's eligibility for English language services.

Scores are reported as language proficiency levels. Proficiency levels (PLs) are reported as whole numbers for the language domain scores and the composite scores are reported to the whole PL or half PL.

Language Domain Scores	Proficiency Level
Listening	4.0
Speaking	2.0
Reading	3.0
Writing	3.0
Composite Scores	**Proficiency Level**
Oral Language	3.0
Literacy	3.5
Overall*	3.0

*Overall composite score is calculated only when all four domains have been assessed.

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