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Summary

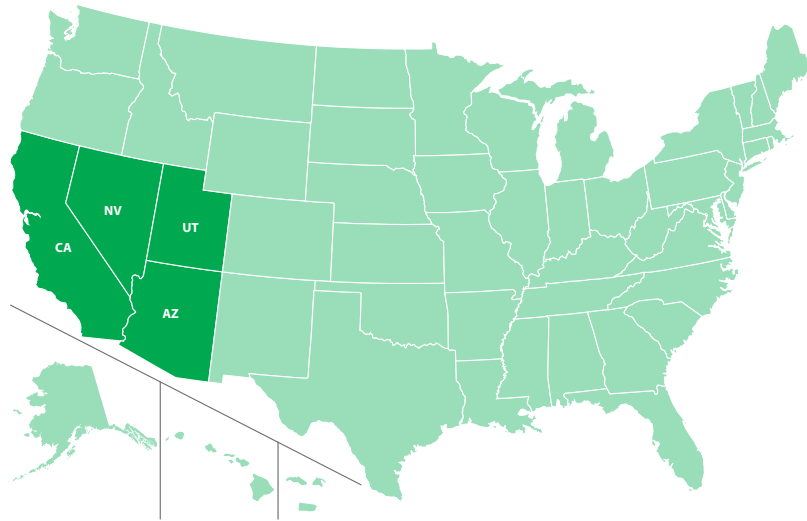
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The relationship between English proficiency and content knowledge for English language learner students in grades 10 and 11 in Utah

This study examines the relationship between performance on Utah’s English proficiency assessment and English language arts and mathematics content assessments by English language learner students and compares the performance of English language learner and non-English language learner students on the content assessments.

Utah has approximately 45,000 English language learner students (U.S. Department of Education 2009), or about 8 percent of its K–12 student population. Staff in the Utah State Office of Education are interested in better understanding the academic performance of English language learner students in relation to their English proficiency and in comparison with the academic performance of their non-English language learner peers. Thus, Utah State Office of Education staff asked Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West to study the performance of English language learner students in grades 10 and 11 on the Utah Academic Language Proficiency Assessment (UALPA) and on the English language arts and mathematics content assessments administered under the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students (U-PASS). They also asked that the study compare English

language learner students’ and their non-English language learner peers’ performance on the content assessments.

Anecdotal reports of English language learner students who performed better on the content assessments than on the language proficiency assessment, a counterintuitive outcome, had raised questions about assessment validity. Utah State Office of Education staff also wanted a comparison of English language learner students’ performance on the language proficiency assessment and their performance on the content assessments because Utah’s rules for redesignating English language learner students as fluent, which are based on performance on both assessments, had changed at the beginning of 2008/09, lowering the required U-PASS English language arts assessment score. And state staff had seen a performance gap between English language learner students’ and their non-English language learner peers and wanted to better understand its magnitude and any content-specific patterns.

Two research questions guided this study:

1. What is the distribution of performance of English language learner students in

grades 10 and 11 on the Utah Academic Language Proficiency Assessment, compared with their performance on the English language arts and mathematics content assessments of the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students?

2. How does the performance of English language learner students on the English language arts and mathematics content assessments of the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students compare with that of non-English language learner students, overall and by content standard?

The Utah State Office of Education provided student-level datasets of all grade 10 and 11 students who took the language proficiency and content assessments in 2008/09. The language proficiency datasets included overall scaled scores and score categories (pre-emergent, emergent, intermediate, and advanced) and the content assessment datasets included the number and percent of correct responses by content standard for each student. Student records were linked across assessments by an anonymous numerical identifier.

Findings include:

- Of grade 10 students who scored below intermediate on the language proficiency assessment, 6 percent scored 3 or 4 (the highest two scores) on the English language arts content assessment; of grade 10 students who scored intermediate on the language proficiency assessment, 14 percent scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment; and of grade 10 students who scored advanced on the language proficiency assessment, 59 percent scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment.
- Of grade 11 students who scored below intermediate on the language proficiency assessment, 1 percent scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment; of grade 11 students who scored intermediate on the language proficiency assessment, 9 percent scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment; and of grade 11 students who scored advanced on the language proficiency assessment, 33 percent scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment.
- The pre-2008/09 criteria for redesignating students as fluent in English were met by 19.7 percent of English language learner students in grade 10 and 12.9 percent in grade 11. The criteria introduced in 2008/09 were met by 25.4 percent of English language learner students in grade 10 and 19.5 percent in grade 11.
- About 9 percent of English language learner students in grade 10 and 5 percent in grade 11 scored 3 or 4 on the English language arts content assessment and below advanced on the language proficiency assessment.
- English language learner students were outscored by non-English language learner students by an average of 1.3–1.6 standard deviations in both grades on the English language arts content assessment and by an average of 0.4–0.7 standard deviation on the mathematics content assessments.

With the continuing growth over the past decade in the number of English language learner students in the West Region, helping states better serve this subgroup is a priority for REL West. The information from this study is expected to aid the Utah State Office of Education in generating descriptive information about English language learner students' performance on the language proficiency and content assessments,

in informing ongoing discussions of rules related to when students should be moved out of English language learner status, and in helping the state agency's curriculum and instruction and assessment programs develop a richer understanding of English language learner students' performance on specific content.

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