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Placement, Progress, and Promotion: ESL Assessment in California's Adult Schools

In California adult schools, standardized language assessments are typically administered to adult English as a second language (ESL) students upon enrollment; students then take these same state-approved tests throughout the academic year to demonstrate progress. As these tests assess only listening and reading skills, schools may use their own internally developed assessments to more accurately place students and subsequently to determine level promotion. Engaged in participatory action research, the researcher interviewed adult school staff to document their varying assessment policies and procedures of adult ESL learners, highlighting the agency-created assessments that provide critical information of students' language proficiencies and achievements. This study underscores the discrepancies between the state's policies and actual pedagogical needs, and it proposes ways to reconstruct how ESL assessment is conducted, such as making available a wider, more comprehensive base of assessments for schools to use, and proposing an updated, common set of standards for use statewide.

Background

Every year more than 400,000 adults in California enroll in English as a second language (ESL) classes, half of whom enroll at their local adult school (California Department of Education & the California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2015). During registration, ESL students typically undergo some sort of language assessment to inform their ESL level, and subsequently they will be administered periodic standardized assessments throughout their schooling to indicate progress and determine level promotion.

Adult schools, if they wish to receive federal payment points for student gain, must use assessment tests approved by National Reporting Services (NRS), namely CASAS, BEST Literacy and BEST Plus 2.0, and TABE Complete Language Assessment System–English (TABE CLAS–E), in addition to other state-specific tests that are administered periodically to track student gains and determine level promotion (National Reporting System, 2016).

Stemming from the 1970s and 1980s movement of competency-based adult education, the CASAS competencies and the CASAS testing systems were developed by a consortium of agencies in the field, including ESL instructors and administrators in California. As such, CASAS has been a mainstay in California adult education for decades, its grassroots history in California being its stronghold. The California Department of Education (CDE) has contracted exclusively with CASAS to collect and report all adult school data since 1999 (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems, n.d. a), and it is currently contracted through fiscal year 2018-2019 (California Department of Education, 2016). The CDE accepts only data that are measured by CASAS tests, and it currently approves the Life and Work Reading and Listening series and Beginning Literacy Reading assessments to document language proficiency and gains of adult ESL students. While CASAS has developed a writing assessment that has also been approved by the NRS, the CDE does not now accept this measurement.

California maintains an awards-based system, meaning that instead of allocating a set amount of funds to each adult education facility each year, the schools instead receive part of their funding through demonstrating gains in language skills. Adult schools send their CASAS scores to the CDE, which then submits the scores to the National Reporting Service (NRS) for compliance purposes. The CDE awards payment points to adult schools that demonstrate student gain via CASAS assessments (as well as EL Civics, which is not focused upon in this study). The source of such funds comes from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy (California Department of Education, n.d.). Many California adult schools receive funds primarily from two sources—the Adult Education Block Grant (funds meant to streamline adult education services between community colleges and adult schools) and the abovementioned WIOA-based payment points received for certain student gains. It is important to note that California adult schools can use any test they wish to assess their students; however, they will receive federal payment points only via gains measured by CASAS. As such, CASAS assessments provide adult schools vital programmatic funds.

Competing Standards

There is concern, however, regarding a lack of alignment between these standardized tests and classroom instruction. In the field of TESL in the US, there is no common set of standards from which we are all basing our classroom curriculum and course-level outlines. Many states have their own state standards for adult ESL, which their respective adult schools use to design course outlines and curriculum. In California, there exist varying adult ESL standards that schools may choose from, including (a) English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Model Standards for Adult Education Programs and (b) the new English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) for Adult Education, which correspond to (c) the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS); additionally, the CASAS tests are based on (d) the CASAS Competencies and CASAS Content Standards.

In 1992, the California Department of Education published the English-as-a-Second Language Model Standards for Adult Education Programs (California Department of Education, 1992), which were developed to create a standard set of measurements for California adult education programs to use to differentiate seven ESL levels and create curriculum across skills. While attempts have been made, these standards have not been revised in 25 years. Many of these standards are based on outdated life skills and lack many of the 21st-century competencies that are of much greater importance, such as knowing how to think critically, access complex and academic language, and synthesize information (Parrish, 2015). In 2013 the U.S. Department of Education–Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) published the College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS) "to forge a stronger link among adult education, postsecondary education, and the world of work'" (Pimentel, 2013, p. 2). Correspondingly, the ELPS were released to provide the language necessary for adult ESL students to be able to access such academic and workplace content and were developed with standards such as CCRS in mind. As such, some California adult schools have begun to look more closely at these standards as an alternative to the 1992 Model Standards and to better align their curriculum to the modern needs of their students. Nonetheless, adult schools are still obliged to use the CASAS assessment tests to document their students' progress. The CASAS Competencies and the CASAS Content Standards content were developed with the input of the CASAS National Consortium for Adult Education and were designed to align with the NRS Educational Functioning Levels (EFLs), which include basic reading and writing skills, listening and speaking skills, and functional and workplace skills. To date, the CASAS Life and Work and Beginning Literacy as-

sessments, then, include both CASAS's standards and its competencies. In 2016, CASAS published new reading standards, which will be included in a future test series also aligned with CCRS and the 2016 NRS Educational Functional Levels (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems, n.d. b).

Given the competing sets of standards available, this purports the question: How can we be testing what is covered in the classroom if there is no agreement as to what standards we are using to inform classroom instruction? Depending on which standards a school or instructor is basing a curriculum, these standardized tests may not match classroom content (Askov, Van Horn, & Carman, 1997; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Shohamy, 2001; Van Horn, 1996). As a result, it is common that ESL instructors consider the standardized test results irrelevant given the test content as well as the inadequacy of the test to document the complexity of student achievement in all skill areas (Askov et al., 1997; Burt & Keenan, 1995; Menard-Warwick 2009). Additionally, because funding is tied to gains measured by CASAS assessments, adult ESL teachers may be encouraged to teach to the test (Gorman & Ernst, 2004; McNamara & Roever, 2006).

Assessing Non- and Low-Literate Learners

Additionally, standardized tests may not adequately assess students at the lowest ESL level (Burt & Keenan, 1995; Condelli & Wrigley, 2006; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Such students represent a variety of beginning-level learners, including adults who never went to school and are not literate in their mother tongue nor any language, to those who have attended school but have low levels of literacy. This level also includes adults who are literate in a non-Roman alphabetic language, such as Arabic, Russian, or Cantonese. Very little research has been conducted on adult ESL literacy learners (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Strube, 2007; Tarone, 2010; van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006), much less assessments at this level. It can take an extraordinary amount of time for an adult without L1 literacy to gain literacy in a second language, and studies have shown it best to first build oral skills upon which to build their forthcoming literacy skills (Croydon, 2005; Spiegel & Sunderland, 2006). Unfortunately, the current standardized testing systems approved by the CDE do not allow a mechanism to document this critical oral-language development. CASAS Beginning Literacy Reading assessment (forms 27R and 28R) is the lowest-level test available, and as such is appropriate for beginning learners. Tasks on this assessment include matching like letters, matching a single word with its corresponding symbol (such as a road sign), or identifying US currency; however, ESL literacy stu-

dents may not yet possess the basic skills necessary to undergo this assessment. To gain federal benchmark dollars for student gain, a school must demonstrate academic growth via a pre- and posttest. A student at this level must get at least five answers correct (out of 30) on the Beginning Literacy Reading assessment to receive a calculable score; the student must then attain at least 20 correct answers on his or her follow-up assessments to earn benchmark payment points. However, for a true beginner, it can take an incredibly long time to learn basic letters, phonics, and sight words (Wrigley, 2001). Therefore, while their progressive gains are monumental in their own eyes and the eyes of their instructors, it can take quite some time before their gains are financially awarded by the state.

Issues of Accuracy

Finally, Mellard and Anderson (2007) have questioned whether it is a valid practice to use the same test battery to place students and to measure progress throughout the school year. In other words, is it really an accurate indicator of progress if students are given the same test battery of all content items every few months, as opposed to being tested only on what was covered in class since the prior exam? Bachman and Purpura (2008) point out that such test scores "would be questioned on the grounds of fairness if test takers have not had the opportunity to learn the material tested" (p. 462).

A further issue with using only the CASAS Life and Work Reading and Listening and Beginning Literacy Reading assessments is that these two tests are (a) multiple choice and (b) measure only passive skills (listening and reading). Even though CASAS has developed many speaking and writing assessments for other clients, the CDE does not allow California adult schools to administer writing and speaking tests for accurate placement and demonstration of measured gain. By the CDE's accepting only measurements based on multiple-choice listening and reading tests, the data recorded of student performance are far from being a holistic picture of linguistic proficiency. As McNamara (2001) points out, "The assumption of performance as a direct outcome of competence is problematic, as it ignores the complex social construction of test performance, most obviously in the case of interactive tests such as direct tests of speaking" (p. 337). As such, it is not atypical that a student will take a CASAS reading test and score into the advanced level, despite the fact that his or her writing and speaking skills are a few levels lower. Therefore, by measuring language competence in only two skill areas, the results may be deceiving.

Agency-Developed and Informal Assessments

Because of these and other issues, many adult education agencies often create their own informal tests to initially place students within their ESL programs and to measure student gains throughout the academic year (Askov et al., 1997; Van Duzer & Berdan,1999; Warriner, 2008). While these types of assessments are highly underresearched, they provide a wealth of knowledge to the assessor and to the students themselves. Furthermore, the richness of using multiple measurements, including standardized tests, teacher observation, and other demonstrations of language in context, provides a more comprehensive insight into a learner's proficiency (Shohamy, 2001).

Nevertheless, there is pressing concern over the validity of agency-created and informal assessments in general. 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). Studies of ESL instructors have shown high variability in assessment strategies (Barkaoui, 2010; Davison, 2004; Leung, 2004). While informal, these assessments are certainly not exempt from the need for reliability (Brown & Hudson, 1998). Such assessments provide critical insight to second language instructors; however, they must align to the standards, provide diagnostic information, be fair, and demonstrate technical quality, utility, and feasibility (Abedi, 2010). Yet without an agreement on what the standards are, each staff member is at risk of interpreting student work differently from how their colleagues do (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006). Recent studies in teacher-based assessments indicate that we lack articulated systems and practice, and that we have yet to comprehend how teachers truly make decisions regarding student performance (Davison 2004; Davison & Leung, 2009).

Research Questions and Design

Drawing on views articulated by ESL instructors, adult school administrators, ESL coordinators, and adult education assessment specialists, this study aims to document the varying policies and practices surrounding assessments in California's adult schools. Employing a participatory action research (PAR) approach, I made use of my existing community of ESL practitioners and assessment experts, who had a wealth of insight into current assessment policies and practices. As such, this inquiry took advantage of their collective wisdom as well as their desire to share their experiences and contribute to the field. This research investigation attempted 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 in California?
3. What sorts of assessments have schools and teachers implemented to supplement standardized testing, and how much importance is given to these informal versus standardized assessments?
4. What additional considerations are present when assessing and promoting adult ESL literacy-level learners?

Participants

This study had two parts. In the first part, 10 personnel representing many facets of adult education in California were interviewed, documenting assessment policies and practices surrounding initial placement as well as level promotion in California adult schools, and discussing the use of CASAS as well as internally created assessments developed by staff to inform their work. Two interviews were conducted with adult school on-site assessment specialists, whose role is to oversee all aspects of intake, assessment, and level promotion at an adult school. However, many adult schools do not have dedicated assessment specialists; therefore, five interviews were conducted specifically with ESL coordinators. ESL coordinators are often in charge of initial intake of new ESL students, and they provide support and professional development to their team of teachers regarding formative and summative assessment in the classroom. As their role typically encompasses both an ESL teacher and quasi-administrative role, their dual perspective on assessment was deemed critical to this study. Additionally, four interviews were conducted with principals and vice principals to understand ESL assessment policy and practice from an administrator's point of view, which includes understanding issues of funding, data reporting, and compliance.

In the second part of the study, eight shorter interviews were conducted specifically with ESL literacy instructors representing six adult schools. It was a purposeful decision to interview only ESL literacy teachers for this research project as this level of adult learners is particularly underresearched (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone, 2010). Furthermore, ESL literacy students often initially do not have the minimal skills required to take standardized tests, so it is imperative to understand how such students are assessed for growth. It should be noted that one of the ESL literacy instructors also served as the ESL coordinator of her respective school (this individual participated in

both interviews, representing both her role as an ESL literacy instructor and her perspective as an ESL coordinator). In all, 17 individuals participated in this study, representing nine adult schools in Northern California. Details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants

Title/agency	*Adult school administrator*	*Assessment specialist*	*ESL coordinator*	*ESL literacy instructor*
CA adult school #1	1			1
CA adult school #2			1	2
CA adult school #3		1	1**	
CA adult school #4	1			
CA adult school #5	1			2
CA adult school #6			1	1
CA adult school #7				1
CA adult school #8	1		1	
CA adult school #9		1		
Total participants	4	2	4	7***

Notes. ** Denotes individual who is both the ESL coordinator and ESL literacy instructor, and who was interviewed regarding assessment policies and practices as well as regarding literacy practice.
*** While there were eight literacy interviews, for the purposes of not double counting participants this number is represented as seven.

Data Collection and Analysis

The 10 interviews with adult school administrators, assessment specialists, and ESL coordinators typically lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, via Skype, or via telephone. The interviews were composed of semistructured questions, which allowed for freedom of direction and the ability to ask site- or personnel-

specific questions, as well as to ask pertinent follow-up questions. Additionally, there were eight shorter interviews with ESL literacy-level instructors. Two were conducted face-to-face and one was conducted via Skype, both types typically lasting between 10 to 20 minutes; five were conducted via email. During all spoken interviews, I was able to capture important data via typed notes, and I followed up regarding any questions afterward.

The notes from the interviews were analyzed for common themes, such as type of assessment task, a focus on a skill area, opinions regarding formal versus informal assessments, and suggestions for improvement locally or statewide. Once the trends revealed themselves, they were woven into this study. To ensure confidentiality, all subjects remain anonymous and are referred to only in a general sense.

Findings

In the first part of this study, 10 personnel—ESL coordinators, assessment specialists, and administrators—were interviewed, representing eight different adult schools.

Initial ESL Placement

Among the eight schools interviewed, there was no consistent method of determining an adult ESL student's placement level; instead, each adult school administers its own method of determining an adult student's ESL level when he or she first enrolls. The adult education facilities represented here generally give more weight to informal assessments to determine ESL level placement than they do to standardized tests.

Open Enrollment Versus Managed Enrollment. In the adult school system, a school may choose to maintain managed enrollment or open enrollment. Managed enrollment indicates that a school accepts new students only during specific open-enrollment periods, ensuring that new groups of students will all begin at once. Open enrollment generally indicates that a school takes in new students every week, resulting in new students' entering the classroom on a weekly basis. Of the eight adult schools represented, two maintain open enrollment, five maintain managed enrollment, and one maintained both, depending on the site. It should be noted, however, that the two schools that had open enrollment also employed assessment specialists to conduct and manage this ongoing process.

Types of Assessments and Procedures Used to Determine Placement. Interviewees described their initial assessment and placement process step-by-step. In every case the students began by filling out a demographic information sheet, with staff available to help. At

one school, this sheet was filled out as soon as the student arrived at the site to inquire about classes—even if it was not on a registration date—to capture the student and make him or her feel vested in the school (the same school conducted a writing sample on the spot, for the same reason). A different school had students fill out demographic information online as they registered for an assessment date.

All schools had prearranged assessment dates, whether they were ongoing weekly assessments (in the case of open enrollment) or dates that were scheduled according to the academic term cycles or as space permitted. Five of the eight schools included an orientation to the school during the registration process, and one school stated that the teachers cover this during the first day of class, in class. The interviewees' descriptions of what was covered during orientation varied greatly—from how to use a bubble sheet for the exam to class hours and schedule to workforce and career pathways available at the site.

After this, the schools' procedures varied drastically. Of the eight schools represented here, only one school solely used internally created tests to assess oral and writing proficiency, with internally designed rubrics to determine score and level—and only administered the CASAS e-test a few weeks into the school term. In contrast, only two schools solely used CASAS tests and procedures to determine students' placement levels. The other five schools used a hodgepodge of internally created and standardized assessments, including CASAS tests, structured/semistructured/unstructured oral assessments or interviews, formal and informal writing samples, internally created level tests, and other standardized tests to determine placement. The varying procedures used are documented in Tables 2 and 3. In all, seven out of eight schools administered at least one type of CASAS assessment, although one of these schools did not use CASAS for the beginning-of-the-year assessment and instead administered the CASAS reading test during the second week of instruction.

It is no surprise that nearly all of the schools use CASAS assessments given that they can receive payment points from the CDE when student gain is demonstrated via these same tests. Nonetheless, in all but one case, schools supplemented the CASAS tests using a plethora of procedures to determine placement or, as was the case at one adult school, did not use the CASAS test at all. One interviewee specifically stated that the school's ESL levels did not correlate with CASAS levels, and another stated that what was covered in the school's classrooms did not match with the content in the CASAS assessments. It appears, therefore, that most individuals interviewed did not think that using only the CASAS tests was an accurate method of determining ESL level. Interestingly, the informal assessments internally created by these

Table 2
Initial Level-Placement Assessment Procedures Within California Adult Schools

Assessment type	*# of adult schools*
Uses CASAS listening assessment *only*	1
Administers CASAS dictation and CASAS oral interview script, along with CASAS reading and math tests	1
Uses internally created oral and written assessment *only*	1
Administers internal oral interview and writing prompt, other standardized tests, and CASAS reading and listening test	1
Administers internal oral interview and writing prompt in addition to CASAS reading test	3
Administers internally created listening and reading/grammar at the beginning of the school year, and uses CASAS tests throughout the rest of school year	1

Table 3
Types of Internally Created Assessments Used During Initial Placement

# of schools using internally created oral assessment	5
# of schools using internally created writing assessment	5
# of schools using internally created listening assessment	1
# of school using internally created reading/grammar test	1

adult schools for proper ESL placement generally focused on active skills—speaking and writing (the passive skills, listening and reading, were given much less weight). Given that the CDE has approved only CASAS Life and Work Reading and Listening and Beginning Literacy Reading assessments, there is a clear discrepancy between what the state accepts to be an accurate measurement of student performance compared to the types of assessment measures the schools themselves consider to be an accurate demonstration of a student's level, that being their writing and speaking ability.

Length of Time. The time it took to conduct the abovementioned assessments also varied. Two schools indicated that their initial assessment and placement took 60 to 90 minutes. One school indicated that its initial placement took one and a half to two hours. Three schools indicated that their initial testing takes two to three hours,

and two schools indicated that their initial placement testing is conducted over a period of two separate days, indicating that the majority of the schools are spending time on accurately placing incoming adult ESL students into the proper ESL level. How each school allocated initial assessment time varied tremendously, and it also depended on how many informal assessments it was conducting in addition to the standardized tests. For example, one school conducted a separate standardized all-purpose test followed by the CASAS reading and listening test on the first day and conducted an informal speaking and listening test on the second day, perhaps taking up to two hours on the first day and one to two hours on the second day. Another school implemented the CASAS appraisal, CASAS pretest (reading), informal speaking, and informal writing test all on one day, which took two to three hours. Summary data for length of time are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Length of Time for Initial Assessment and Placement

60 to 90 minutes	2 schools
1.5 to 2 hours	1 school
2 to 3 hours	3 schools
2 separate days	2 schools

Accommodations for ESL Literacy Learners. Two sites stated their specific concern to find ESL literacy students as soon as possible during initial registration, as the assessment process can be overwhelming for such students. One coordinator stated that she wanted to alleviate "anxiety" often felt by ESL literacy students going through the registration process. Another stated he wanted to avoid a situation in which an ESL literacy student is surrounded by a roomful of new students taking an assessment test and feels uncomfortable to "out" himself or herself as unable to take the test in a public setting. Both sites stated that they easily identified these students by noticing when they were having difficulty filling out the initial registration paperwork; one site implemented the technique of approaching the students waiting in line for registration, asking questions such as "Zero English?" "No ABC?"

Furthermore, a few of the sites ensured that their internally created assessments included level-appropriate tasks for ESL literacy learners. For example, one site created a writing assessment specifically designed for these learners, which included having them write the alphabet, copy words, and respond to a picture prompt. Five sites

used an internally created oral assessment (generally in the form of an interview), allowing the ESL literacy learner to demonstrate his or her oral English abilities.

ESL Level Promotion

ESL level-promotion policies and practices within adult schools vary, using both formal and informal measurements: Of the eight adult schools represented here, there is no consistent method of ESL level promotion—each adult school administers its own method of determining when an adult ESL student should be promoted to the next ESL level at its facility. These adult education facilities generally give more weight to formative (which monitors student progress) and summative (which evaluates cumulative student learning, typically at the end of a unit) informal assessments to determine ESL level promotion than they do to standardized tests.

Of the eight adult schools, only two rely solely on CASAS test scores to determine ESL level promotion. Two additional schools rely on single-teacher discretion only, and the other four schools all have their own systems of teacher collaboration to determine how and when a student should be promoted. Table 5 shows the varying criteria adult schools use to determine student promotion to the next level.

Table 5
Determiners of ESL Level Promotion

CASAS score *only* determines level promotion	2 schools
Teacher discretion *only* determines level promotion	2 schools
Exit criteria collaboratively developed by teachers determine level promotion	2 schools
Teachers meet once per quarter to discuss who should be promoted	1 school
Internal teacher-created level test scores in combination with EL Civics scores and other classroom assessments	1 school

The final school represented in Table 5 is particularly comprehensive, having developed its own internal teacher-created tests (a series of five levels including reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar), which are implemented a few weeks before the end of each academic term, and whose scores are then weighed against the students' EL Civics scores and a teacher-maintained chart documenting all other classroom assessments and exit criteria. At another site, the teachers were being paid to collaboratively develop a similar packet

of exit criteria, which consist of CASAS scores, Career and College Readiness Standards (CCRS), and other indicators as collectively decided upon by the teachers at that site.

In contrast, two schools solely used CASAS scores for promotion. At one school, the teachers received pressure from administration to move students based on these scores, and as such the interviewee stated she wished she had another mechanism to demonstrate that the student was indeed at the correct level. For example, if a CASAS reading score indicated that a student was performing at a higher ESL level than where currently placed, ideally a teacher could implement a standardized test in a different skill area, such as writing, to indicate that the student was placed in the correct level. This would provide the teacher, and the student, more leverage in their argument to be placed at the most appropriate level based on their performance in various skill areas, and not be placed solely based on their reading level. The other six sites stated they did not receive this sort of pressure, as administrators understood that CASAS scores were but a single indicator of student level, and not an absolute indicator, and as such had developed or were developing more comprehensive methods of determining level promotion.

Assessment Practices of ESL Literacy Instructors

In the second part of this study, eight short interviews were conducted with adult ESL literacy instructors at six adult schools. The purpose was to determine whether they use CASAS data to inform instruction and track student gains, and how and when they decide to promote a student from ESL literacy to the next level. When asked if they use CASAS test data to inform their teaching practice, two teachers stated that they use the competency reports as a general indication of subjects that need whole-class review, another two indicated that they use CASAS data just to confirm that the students are progressing, one teacher said "sparingly," and three said "no."

The instructors were further asked how and/or when they decide to promote their adult ESL literacy students to the beginning-low level. In the previous section the administrators, coordinators, and assessment specialists stated that their sites overwhelmingly favored teacher discretion in determining student promotion. Here, three teachers held the decision-making power to promote students, two teachers taught a multilevel class (in which promotion does not occur), two worked at a facility where CASAS scores exclusively warrant promotion (both teachers were from the same school), and one simply did not provide a response. Of the three instructors who held the authority to promote their students, they all had a unique set of

criteria that they used. One instructor based it entirely on personal observation of the student:

> 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 shows 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.

Another instructor used a mix of observation and performance on informal and standardized tests:

> When I consider advancing students I evaluate on their classroom performance, confidence. … 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.

The third instructor provided a structured checklist of requirements for promotion, which included typical items from the California ESL Model Standards ("Answer question with "Yes" or "No" and "Ask basic questions"), as well as her own items, such as "Write 15 or more words in one minute" and "Pronunciation is adequate enough to be understood." As with other responses in this study, there is no single way of determining promotion; rather, each instructor is operating autonomously in determining such criteria.

Discussion

California adult schools operate with much autonomy with regard to leveling and instruction—there is no pressure over which standards to use nor is there state-controlled curriculum. However, in this study we saw that there is a lack of continuity in our assessment procedures, as well as concern regarding the validity of internal assessment measures. Taking the data from this study into account, what follows is a discussion of issues and recommendations.

There Is a Strong Need for a Wider Selection of Assessment Tests for Students to Demonstrate Gains in a Variety of Language-Skill Areas

California adult schools have access only to CASAS listening or reading–based tests to assess an ESL student's language proficiency and progress. Of the eight schools interviewed, the small minor-

ity—two schools—solely used CASAS scores for determining initial placement and/or level promotion. The majority invested funds to internally develop more comprehensive systems of determining ESL level, as they placed importance upon having a more accurate account of a student's proficiency to then place them in the most appropriate ESL level/class. As such, these respondents indicated that using the standardized tests alone did not provide enough of a comprehensive student profile. Their agency-created quantitative and qualitative measures to assess students provide great insight to the school; however, these same data do not count as reportable. Resources in California's adult schools are already stretched thin, and it is unfortunate that many adult schools are re-creating the wheel, developing their own intake and assessment of new students as well as their own exit criteria for level promotion. At the very least, it would be of great benefit for adult school staff to receive explicit training, perhaps by the state, in creating valid and reliable test measurements to ensure that their homegrown assessments are effective.

We must also consider the students' perspective. CASAS provides two tests for each level—this means the student can alternate tests every few months and not take the same test twice in a row. But often, a student is repeatedly given the same pair of tests throughout the school year to help ensure that the student makes a sizeable gain—which produces a payment point—within the year. In a school that administers CASAS reading tests, say, every two months, it is feasible that a single student will repeat the same test three times in one academic year. As such, one interviewee mentioned that her students always complain about receiving these "same" standardized CASAS test every two months, often bringing them to tears thinking that the redundancy was due to their lack of progress.

There is an additional issue here—the fact that adult schools are generally leveled by integrated skill. This means that each class—literacy, beginning-low, beginning-high, and so forth—will teach all skills per that level—reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, and the like. During assessment, if a student demonstrated intermediate-high reading skills but beginning-high writing and speaking skills, the adult school must choose where to place that student. As there is no agreement on how to place such students who do not neatly "fit" into a level, each adult school has its own policy, or perhaps it is up to the discretion of the person doing the assessment. Nonetheless, such a student will be given a "label"—his or her ESL level—which will place the student in the school leveling system. The situation can get even more severe—there are many students who have extremely high oral proficiency, perhaps at near-nativelike flu-

ency, but they cannot read and write. Into what level do such students get placed, and what "label" is assigned to them? Do we place such students by lowest proficiency level, or some average score of all skill levels? This issue of leveling not only affects adult schools, but it is also an issue at the high school level (Abedi, 2008).

> **Scenario:** A new student takes CASAS appraisal and Reading pretest and qualifies at intermediate-high. Student then undergoes informal speaking and written exam, and teachers determine student should be placed at beginning-high based on productive skills. Student remains at intermediate-high throughout the year building speaking and writing skills. However, the student's CASAS Reading test scores stagnate, as her current reading skill is higher than the class she is enrolled in. As a result, the student sees no gain in standardized performance; similarly, the school does not collect any payment points on this student for lack of measured progress on the standardized reading test.

As we see above, when a student's CASAS test level does not match what the school determines to be his or her level, the school may be unable to access federal funding allocations as the student is marked as not having progressed. However, if CASAS writing and speaking assessments were approved for official use by the CDE (the writing assessment that has already been approved by NRS and accepted by a few states), adult schools could use them as an additional option for schools to demonstrate gains, argue against promotion, and allow students to demonstrate a more holistic picture of their language ability.

Additionally, part of this study focused on the policies and practices of assessing adult ESL literacy learners. Since often literacy-level students place too low to take the standardized test, the schools must be provided with some way to document their initial abilities, such as in oral skills or emerging literacy, so that the instructor can then measure gains and the student's achievements can be recognized. This could be easily remediable via state approval of the CASAS speaking assessment, or another comparable standardized speaking or emerging writing (i.e., copying, simple spelling) test.

To approve such tests does not imply that the test is mandated; instead, it simply means that it is available as one of many measures that adult schools may choose to use to demonstrate student proficiency and growth. Being mindful of the types of language gains that are currently awarded with federal monies and those that are ignored, we can advocate for new types of assessments to recognize a variety of language skills.

There Is a Need for an Agreed-Upon Set of Adult ESL Standards

California adult schools are presented with concurrent sets of standards—(a) the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Model Standards for Adult Education Programs, (b) the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) for Adult Education, (c) the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS), and (d) the CASAS Competencies and CASAS Content Standards. Since each school is creating its own independent systems of placement and promotion based on one or more of these standards, an adult ESL student may be placed into one level at one adult school but then be placed into an entirely different level at another adult school. An administrator in this study said, "In order to use the tools effectively the curriculum should match, but it doesn't," and later added, "Are we speaking the same language?" indicating that each adult school, and perhaps each instructor, is operating on a different platform, using the same terminology but with different definitions. Furthermore, if the content of classroom instruction does not match the content in the test, then the students are being tested on material that they have not yet—or may not ever—cover. Furthermore, while the CDE's website is filled with promotion of career and college readiness, there exists a mismatch between the current adult ESL standards in California and the push toward 21st-century skills. Uniting adult schools under a single set of standards would not only help streamline our systems cross-institutionally, but it would also address internal issues of teachers at a single school not agreeing on what skills a student needs to demonstrate to be promoted. At the very least, aligning standards would help align our conversations and goals regarding student levels.

Future Directions

This research study represents only an extremely small part of all adult schools in the state. It would be of great benefit to expand this study to include a larger number of adult schools to allow for more comprehensive data, and to discover what adult schools deem as best practices in ESL assessment. Furthermore, this research study did not include two other types of formal assessments conducted in California adult education classrooms that can be submitted to the government for payment points, those being citizenship tests (provided by CASAS) and EL Civics assessments. EL Civics encompass a broad range of tasks that use all language skills, and as such merit their own study on how they are used for summative and formative assessments in the classroom, as well as what weight they are given when considering level promotion.

As we take a larger look at adult ESL assessments in California, it

is important to note that the field of second language assessment is far beyond the simplistic four-skill framework and is now deep in conversation about how to test for pronunciation, pragmatics, and integrated skills, among others (Purpura, 2016)—as such, an expansion of which skills we are assessing should be incorporated into the adult education discourse. Moreover, we must be careful to acknowledge the breadth of ESL programming within adult education—family literacy classes, academic transition courses, vocational ESL, for example—and find a respectful balance of honoring the standards while upholding the autonomy of each of these curricular areas.

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Note

[1]A version of this study will be published in the 2016 LESLLA Symposia conference proceedings:

Gonzalves, L. (forthcoming). When standardized tests fail: Assessing ESL literacy learners in California. In M. Sosiński (Ed.), *Lengua y alfabetización: enseñando a alumnos LESLLA/ Language and Literacy: Teaching LESLLA Students. Proceedings From the 12th Annual LESLLA Symposium*, Granada, Spain, Universidad de Granada.

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