ELPA Validity Evaluation Instrument:

Focus group protocol for district administrators about identifying, placing, exiting, and monitoring English learners

Washington		edCount, LLC
Idaho		Center for Assessment
Indiana		UCLA
Montana		Synergy Enterprises, Inc
Oregon		PIRE

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About EVEA

The U.S. Department of Education funded Enhanced Assessment Grant *Evaluating the Validity of English Language Proficiency Assessments* (EVEA; CFDA 84.368) was awarded to the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction of the State of Washington in fall 2009. The project brought together five states – Idaho, Indiana, Montana, Oregon, and Washington – to work on collaborative and independent validity plans for English language proficiency assessments (ELPAs) over an 18-month period. During the EVEA funding period, none of the partner states belonged to an existing ELPA consortium; rather each had worked with commercial test developers to create state-wide ELPAs that are aligned with their state English language development (ELD) standards. The main project goal was for each state to create a validity argument for its ELPA system. Additional project outcomes included:

- Building individual State Interpretive Arguments for the validity of each state's ELPA,
- Building a Common Interpretive Argument for any ELPA;
- Designing a set of studies and instruments to support and pilot test these arguments; and
- Making instruments publically available at the close of the project for the wider education community to access.

This research instrument is one product of these efforts.

Collaborating institutions

edCount, LLC
the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (NCIEA, the Center for Assessment)
The Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS) at the University of California, Los
   Angeles (UCLA)
Synergy Enterprises, Inc. (SEI)
The Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE)

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Research Objective

This instrument is designed to help state administrators collect information about four critical decision points in the linguistic progression of an EL: **identification** as an EL, **placement** into ELD and content classes, **exit** from the language instructional program, and the mandatory **monitoring** period that follows program exit. Although these topics pertain to different claims within the EVEA common interpretive argument (CIA), they are often within the jurisdiction of the same individuals (district or regional administrators), such that a conversation with practitioners on all of these topics may help states to identify areas in which districts need additional support, or topics that warrant further, more detailed study.

This document outlines the claims, underlying assumptions, and research questions that can serve as the foundation for studies to determine how and how consistently districts are making decisions about which students receive and stop receiving services, as well as who makes these decisions, and with what information. In addition, it provides a sample focus group protocol designed to support a 30-45 minute discussion on each of these topics; states may use this protocol in its entirety, or pick and choose which topics are most important to them and administer only those sequences of questions. This protocol may also be administered in concert with the **Survey of district-level identification and placement procedures for English learners,** with the thought that a survey may be used to collect descriptive information about current practice, and a focus group may provide a forum in which administrators can provide feedback about challenges, and suggest potential improvements to that practice.

Claim 1

Students have been appropriately identified to participate in the ELP program and assessment.

Underlying assumptions:

The state/district/school uses a consistent definition for EL-status that is based on linguistic proficiency.

The state/district/school uses a consistent protocol for identifying new students as potential ELs.

The state/district/school 'sidentification instruments (i.e., home language survey, enrollment questionnaire, ELP placement test, etc.) are well-designed and collect appropriate information to determine a student's potential EL-status and linguistic proficiency.

The state/district/school 'sidentification procedures are consistently followed and administered as intended.

Parents and students present accurate information to state/district/school administrators and practitioners.

Claim 3

Teachers have the support and resources to provide instruction to promote students' acquisition of academic English.

Underlying assumptions:

(Content and ELD) Teachers receive information about ELs who enroll in their classes (e.g., placement test scores, and information about personal and academic background for new ELs; previous year's ELPA scores for returning ELs).

(Content and ELD) Teachers understand how to interpret information that they receive about ELs who enroll in their classes.

(Content and ELD) Teachers understand how to use and apply information that they receive about ELs who enroll in their classes to support these students' needs.

Claim 8

ELPA scores/ performance levels are used appropriately to inform decisions related to assessment system goals

Underlying assumptions:

ELPA scores are used appropriately for exit decisions.

Districts monitor former ELs to ensure that the students are faring adequately without EL services.

The information that districts collect in the monitoring process is appropriate for determining whether the students are faring adequately without language support.

Students who exit from services go on to meet grade-level achievement standards in mainstream English-only classrooms.

Research questions

Research Question 1.1: To what extent do schools and districts use and apply consistent definitions and procedures when **identifying** EL students?

Research Question 1.2: To what extent do schools and districts have access to and use well-designed **identification** instruments?

Research Question 1.3: What obstacles do states or districts face in the **identification** process, and what resources or supports might help to mitigate these?

Research Question 2.1: To what extent do districts and schools have access to and use appropriate information to **place** ELs in language and content classes?

Research Question 3.1: What role do ELPA scores play in the decision to **exit** students from services, and how helpful are they (scores) as an indicator?

Research Question 3.2: To what extent do districts or schools feel confident that their **exit** decisions are appropriate and well-informed?

Research Question 4.1: What evidence do districts or schools **monitor** to determine whether exited former-ELs have been appropriately redesignated, and are prepared to meet academic achievement standards in mainstream classrooms?

Research Question 4.2: To what extent does the **monitoring** process find that former-ELs are meeting academic achievement standards in mainstream classrooms?

Method

District administrators, EL coordinators, and any other practitioners who oversee EL-related policies for one or more districts are likely to be the most appropriate participants for this focus group. School-level administrators may also be included if the state feels this is appropriate, though these individuals should be included in addition to district-level participants, not necessarily instead of. Participants should represent a range of different districts and experiences in serving ELs. Exhibit 1 shows suggested sampling methods for ensuring that the focus group participants represent a variety of different districts and settings within the state.

Exhibit 1. Focus group participant sampling suggestions.

Participant or District traits	Group composition: Include participants with, or from districts with -
District size	- Small overall populations. - Large overall populations.
EL population size	- Large EL populations (proportionate to overall population). - Small EL populations (proportionate to overall population).
EL population change	- Relatively stable EL populations over the past 5 years. - Significant change (growth) in EL population over the past 5 years.
EL population characteristics	- Diverse EL populations (relative to the state's overall EL population). - Large immigrant or refugee EL populations. - EL populations with a strong native community within the district.
High- or low- performing EL subgroup	- High-performing EL subgroup on state accountability measures. - Low-performing EL subgroup on state accountability measures.
Administrator familiarity with EL issues	- Strong background knowledge about serving ELs. - Relatively weak background knowledge about serving ELs.
Administrator experience	<3 years' experience in their role or district. 3-10 years' experience in their role or district.

The recommended size for this focus group is 5-8 participants. In order to get a wide and representative sample of districts and administrators, the state should conduct multiple groups if possible. If conducted in its entirety, this focus group should take 3-3.5 hours to administer. **Exhibit 2** shows a sample agenda for conducting the focus group below. Note that the times for each segment can be slightly altered (e.g., Topics 1 and 4 may be budgeted for 30 minutes, rather than 45).

Exhibit 2. Sample agenda for focus group

Time	Activity
8.30-9.00am	Participants arrive
	Focus group introduction
	Participant introductions
9.00-9.45am	Discussion about identification
9.45-10.15am	Discussion about placement
10.15-10.30am	BREAK
10.30-11.15am	Discussion about exit and redesignation
11.15-11.45am	Discussion about monitoring
11.45am-12.00pm	Wrap-up and dismissal

States can use this protocol in concert with the **Survey of district-level identification and placement procedures for English learners** to collect descriptive information about identification and placement. Since this protocol will only collect practitioner opinions, the survey data can help to triangulate anecdotal or observational information shared during the focus group. If using the survey, the state should administer it to participants prior to this focus group, and collect and analyze results prior to the group's beginning. This will also allow the state the option of tailoring the conversation or questions to specific trends found in the survey responses. As a note, the EVEA partners did not design a survey to address exit and monitoring; states who plan to use the focus group protocol may wish to develop an additional survey, or to expand this one, to address those topics as well.

States should also consider requesting that participants bring certain artifacts with them to share with other participants, or with the state, including:

- The district's home language survey,

- Sample student reports or files that ELD or content teachers might receive when EL students are placed in their classes.

- The district's exit/redesignation protocol, and

- The district's monitoring protocol.

Analysis

It is important to note that this focus group collects opinions about the claims and assumptions listed above; the outcomes of this conversation would not be sufficient to provide evidence for these claims and assumptions on their own, and states will ultimately need to collect additional information to serve as evidence for these claims.

The conversations and information from this focus group may help states to identify areas that require further scrutiny in their system. Following the focus group, the state should identify themes from the comments and feedback of the participants, and determine which of these are most pressing for further review. These themes, as well as analysis of the artifacts that participants bring, and analysis of the survey results, if administered, can help states to triangulate specific areas that may be particularly in need of more in-depth research to determine their role in the state's overall interpretive argument.

Protocol

Thank you for participating in this focus group with us.

Facilitators introduce themselves with some background/context.

We appreciate your taking the time to share your thoughts with us, and we look forward to hearing what you have to say.

> **If pairing focus group with survey of flagging and identification practices:**
>
> We know that you also filled out an online survey prior to coming here – we thank you for taking the time to do that as well, and we look forward to learning more about your identification processes through those results. If you haven't had a chance to fill that survey out yet, by the way, it's not too late, and we would still appreciate your input.

As we said in our invitation, the purpose of this group is to gather some information and feedback from stakeholders in this state about how to potentially improve systems and services for English language learners. This is an opportunity for you to share your ideas and suggestions with us about how you think your district or state could do some things better, and about what kinds of support you or your colleagues might need in order to make those changes.

This group will focus on four topics: we'll spend the first 30-45 minutes talking about **identification processes and protocols** for ELLs, with a specific focus on home language surveys and their design and use. We'll then take about half an hour each to discuss **placement processes** for getting LEP students into content and ELD classes, **exit criteria and processes** for redesignating students as former-LEP and transitioning them out of programs, and **monitoring processes and procedures** for ensuring that former-LEP students are meeting academic achievement standards once they stop receiving support services.

We are going to start by asking you to introduce yourselves and tell us all a bit about your work with ELs.

> **If recording the focus group:**
>
> Following those introductions, we will begin audio-recording this session. This recording is for research purposes only, and will be destroyed after this project is over. We are not looking for information about specific individuals or districts, and nothing that you share in this session will be linked to you or your district. We hope you'll feel comfortable enough to be candid with this group, but if you feel uncomfortable participating in any part of the conversation, please feel free to abstain. We also ask that you not share anything after this focus group that

Invite each person to identify themselves by first name, role, and how they interact with ELLs.

Topic 1: Identification and home language surveys

RQ 1.1. To what extent do schools and districts use and apply consistent definitions and procedures when identifying EL students?

RQ 1.2. To what extent do districts have access to and use well-designed identification instruments?

RQ 1.3. What obstacles do states or districts face in the identification process, and what resources or supports might help to mitigate these?

Introduction:	The first thing we want to talk about today is identification – the process by which new students are flagged and identified as ELs when they first enroll. We're going to focus especially on home language surveys, but we don't need to limit our conversation to that topic – all components of the identification process are on the table for discussion.	5 minutes
Question 1.1a: *(For states that **do not** mandate specific identification protocols)*	Let's start by talking about identification in general. Right now, you may have some flexibility about how you figure out which students may need to take an ELP screener test to see if they are ELs. In an ideal world, how would you like the identification process to work, and what information or supports might you need for that to happen?	
Question 1.1b: *(For states that **do** mandate specific identification protocols)*	Let's start by talking about identification in general. Right now, the state provides you with a home language survey that you are required to use to screen new students as potential ELs, and the results of that survey determine which students should take the ELP screener test. In an ideal world, how would you like the identification process to work, and what information or supports might you need for that to happen?	
Positive prompt:	What are some practices you have seen in your own schools or districts that you find effective and that might be helpful for others to adopt?	10-15 minutes
Negative prompt:	What are some challenges or stumbling points in your district's current system that you would like to improve, or that might benefit from more support or resources?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Do you find that identification needs or challenges vary depending on students': • Age or grade-level? • Immigration status? • Migrant status or history? • Home language or ethnic background?	
Question 1.2:	Let's get a bit more specific about the home language survey, or whatever preliminary instrument or questions you use to determine which students might need testing to see if they are ELs. What kinds of questions do you think are important to ask at this phase in the process?	10-15 minutes

Positive prompt:	Is there any information that you feel is particularly critical or helpful to collect with the HLS?
	Do you have any suggestions or proposals for questions or the phrasing of questions you would like to see on an HLS?
Negative prompt:	Is there any information that you're not currently getting from your HLS that you feel would be helpful or important to collect?
	Are there any HLS questions you have seen that you think are problematic due to their language or phrasing? How would you improve or change these?
Probes/clarifiers:	Do you find that you are more or less confident in the reliability of HLS responses depending on: • Students' age or grade-level? • Families' immigration status? • Families' migrant status or history? • Families' home language or ethnic background? • Who interprets HLS responses? Have you made any changes to your HLS to improve its ability to flag the right students for further inquiry into their EL status?
Question 1.3:	Let's end this portion by talking about consistency in identification, both at the district level and the state level. What practices have you found effective or do you think are important to ensure that all ELs are flagged and identified via consistent criteria from school to school or district to district?
Positive prompt:	Are there certain components of the identification process that you think should be scripted or systematic so that they are the same for all students?
	What supports or guidance might schools or districts need from districts or state to help ensure consistency?
Negative prompt:	Are there certain components of the identification process that you think should be flexible and include conversation and professional judgment?
Probes/clarifiers:	Why do you think it's important that this part of the process be consistent/flexible?

The segment "Question 1.3" block is marked with a time of **10-15 minutes**.

Total time for this segment: 30-45 minutes

Topic 2: Placement procedures for ELs

RQ 2.1. To what extent do districts and schools have access to and use appropriate information to place ELs in language and content classes?

Introduction:	Now that we've talked about identification, we want to talk briefly about the <u>placement</u> process for students who have been identified as ELs (presumably by an ELP placement test like the Woodcock-Muñoz or the IPT). We're interested in hearing your thoughts and input about what information might be useful for instructors who enroll newly identified ELs in their classrooms. We recognize that these practices may be affected by the structure of your district's process requirements – there may be some areas where you have flexibility on these points, and others where you have to follow a certain protocol. Again, we're interested in both the actual and the ideal here.	5 minutes
Question 2.1:	In an ideal world, what information would you like to have on hand in order to make good, informed decisions about how to place your newly identified ELs in order to provide them the best targeted instruction?	
Positive prompt:	Do you have any ideas or suggestions about how your district could collect this information? Does your district already use any information or protocols that you find particularly effective or critical to accurate placement of ELs into content and ELD classrooms?	
Negative prompt:	Do you perceive any obstacles to collecting this information?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Ask respondents about their views on including any of the following information/procedures in the placement process: • Domain-specific information about linguistic proficiency in English, if available. • Information about native language literacy and proficiency. • Academic achievement information about performance in content areas in native language, if available. • Academic achievement information from previous enrollment in U.S. schools, if available. • Diagnostic test scores in content areas. • Student background information, particularly in terms of formal education or immigration status (e.g., refugee, recent immigrant, preschool attendance, etc.), if applicable.	10-15 minutes
Question 2.2:	In an ideal world, what information do you think these students' content teachers (and ESL or language program teachers, if	10-15

	applicable) should receive when new ELs enroll in their classes?	minutes
Positive prompt:	Do you have any ideas or suggestions about how your district could disseminate this information to teachers?	
Negative prompt:	Do you perceive any obstacles to collecting or using this information?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Ask respondents about their views on disseminating or receiving any of the following information/procedures about new ELs in their classrooms: • Domain-specific information about linguistic proficiency in English, if available. • Information about literacy and linguistic proficiency in home language, if available. • Academic achievement information about performance in content areas in home language, if available. • Academic achievement information from previous enrollment in U.S. schools, if available. • Diagnostic test scores in content areas. • Student background information, particularly in terms of formal education or immigration status (e.g., refugee, recent immigrant, etc.), if applicable.	

Total time for this segment: 30 minutes

Topic 3: Redesignation procedures for ELs

RQ 3.1. To what extent do districts or schools use and apply consistent data and criteria when exiting and redesignating EL students?

RQ 3.2 To what extent do districts or schools feel confident that their exit decisions are appropriate and well-informed?

Introduction:	Next, we want to have a brief discussion also about redesignation, the process by which ELs are deemed to be proficient and ready to exit services and be reclassified as former-LEP. As you all know, cut scores on the ELPA must play a role in determining whether a student has achieved English proficiency and is ready to exit services. In some districts and states, however, practitioners may opt to use other factors such as content assessment scores, teacher input, or multiple years' worth of ELPA data to determine whether a student is ready to be redesignated.	5 minutes
Question 3.1:	First let's talk about the role that ELPA cut scores play in these decisions. How helpful or important do you find these scores to be in making exit decisions, and why?	10-15 minutes
Positive prompt:	Do you find ELPA scores to be helpful in making exit decisions, in the sense that they are an accurate indicator of whether a student is ready to exit service?	
Negative prompt:	Do you find that students often are not ready to exit services, even if their scores indicate that they should?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Have you ever revised or moved your exit cut scores based on concerns that the exit cut score was not well placed?	
Question 3.2:	If you do use additional information to ELPA scores to make exit decisions, what other information do you think should factor into the decision to exit a student from ELD services?	10-15 minutes
Positive prompt:	If you use information beyond just the ELPA scores, why do you feel that this information is appropriate or important? How do you combine it with other information (e.g., ELPA scores) to reach your decision?	
Negative prompt:	Is there any information that is/could be used to make these decisions that you worry would be irrelevant, or might influence decisions in a negative way?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Do any of you have anecdotes about students who you feel were either redesignated too early, or who stayed in the program for too long? In either type of example, how could you tell that this was the case (what indicators did you observe)?	

Question 3.3:	<u>Who</u> do you think should be involved in the decision process about whether to redesignate a student as former-LEP?	
Positive prompt:	Are there any people who you feel <u>should</u> be involved in these decisions but currently are not?	
Negative prompt:	Are there any people who you feel should <u>not</u> be involved in these decisions but currently are?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Why do you think these individuals are appropriate or important to include in this decision? Ask respondents about their views on including any of the following people/groups in redesignation decisions: • Assessment directors/specialists, • Title III/ESL directors/specialists, • Other district administrators, • Principals, • Content teachers, • Literacy coordinator, • ELL coordinator, • ELD/ESL teachers, • Parents, • The student him/herself.	10-15 minutes

Total time for this segment: 30-45 minutes

Topic 4: Monitoring former ELs

RQ 4.1. What evidence do districts or schools monitor to determine whether exited former-ELs have been appropriately redesignated, and are prepared to meet academic achievement standards in mainstream classrooms?

RQ 4.2. To what extent do districts and schools find, via the monitoring process, that former-ELs are meeting academic achievement standards in mainstream classrooms?

Introduction:	In the remaining time, we'd like to discuss monitoring protocols. As you know, federal law requires states to monitor former EL students for two years following their exit from a language instructional program; states and districts may also have their own reasons for wanting to follow the progress of exited ELs to determine whether these students are doing OK in mainstream classes without language support.	5 minutes
Open-ended question 4.1:	What information or criteria do you consider appropriate or critical for monitoring former-ELs? How should this information be collected, and by whom?	10-15 minutes
Positive prompt:	Do you have set protocols or instruments that you use to monitor former ELs and determine whether they are faring adequately without support? If so, how did you develop these?	
Negative prompt:	If you do not have set protocols or instruments, what has prevented you from creating or using these? What support might be necessary to make these more available or realistic for use in your district?	
Probes/clarifiers:	Why do you believe this information or these criteria are important?	
Open-ended question 4.2:	How often does your district re-classify students as LEP based on monitoring data, and what is the decision process or rationale for this?	10-15 minutes
Positive prompt:	If your district rarely re-classifies students, what factors do you think are responsible for this success rate (e.g., exit criteria, monitoring process, language instructional program, etc.)?	
Negative prompt:	When you do re-classify students as ELs, do these decisions prompt re-examination of your ELPA cut scores, exit criteria, or language instruction program itself?	
Probes/clarifiers:	If you have made program or process changes based on re-classifications, what was your rationale for that decision?	
	If you have not made program changes or have not had to reclassify any students, why do you think this is the case?	

Total time for this segment: 30 minutes

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