California Department of Education

Executive Office

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# **MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:**  April 15, 2020

**TO:** MEMBERS, State Board of Education

**FROM:** TONY THURMOND, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

**SUBJECT:** Update on the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California Pilot Utilizing a Cognitive Lab Methodology.

## Summary of Key Issues

This Memorandum provides updates on the activities related to the development of the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (Alternate ELPAC). Refer to Attachment 1 for the *Preliminary Findings on the Development and Evaluation of Task Types for the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California.*

## Background

The California Department of Education (CDE) is developing the Alternate ELPAC for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are determined eligible for an alternate assessment by their individualized education program (IEP) team. The purpose of the Alternate ELPAC is twofold: (1) the Initial Alternate ELPAC will provide information to determine a student’s initial classification as an English learner (EL) or as initial fluent English proficient; and (2) the Summative Alternate ELPAC will provide information on students’ annual progress toward English language Proficiency and support decisions for students to be reclassified as fluent English proficient.

On January 14–30, 2020, Educational Testing Service (ETS), in collaboration with the Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) and the CDE, conducted a pilot using cognitive lab methodology to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of task types being considered for use on the Alternate ELPAC. The pilot using a cognitive lab methodology sought to gain insights into test examiner and student interactions with the test and gathered information from observations and interviews to inform the next steps of the Alternate ELPAC development. The cognitive lab was the research method used to closely examine participants’ cognitive processes in completing given tasks.

Students who were eligible for this pilot study had a primary language other than English and were determined to be eligible for alternate assessments by their IEP team. While eligibility for alternate assessment is determined by the student’s IEP team, it is, for the purpose of this study, defined as a student’s (1) having a disability that significantly impacts cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior; and (2) requiring extensive, direct individualized instruction and substantial supports to achievement measurement on academic standards.

For this study, 71 students with significant cognitive disabilities, of which 13 students were not ELs, were administered a sample of the Alternate ELPAC items in a one-on-one administration with a test examiner familiar with the student. Test examiners recorded student responses in the student testing interface during test administration. In addition, test examiners recorded their observations of students’ test-taking processes and evidence of students’ responses to content after the administration of each task type. The students were given an opportunity to provide feedback about their experience. Finally, test examiners were interviewed directly after the test administration.

## Development and Evaluation of Task Types for Proposed Alternate ELPAC Test Blueprint

The development of the Alternate ELPAC task types and the proposed test blueprint was based on professional judgment by ETS and CDE staff, input from a range of stakeholders with relevant and complementary expertise, and findings from the January 2020 Alternate ELPAC pilot utilizing cognitive lab methodology. As part of the analysis of the pilot test, decisions will be made regarding which task types are suitable for use on the field test forms and how many items in each task type are needed to appropriately sample the 2012 English Language Development (ELD) Standards via the ELD Connectors, support reliable score reporting, and provide a test form that is of appropriate length and reduces the testing burden.

The *Preliminary Findings on the Development and Evaluation of Task Types for the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California,* in Attachment 1, provides a brief report on the pilot administration and preliminary recommendations to develop and evaluate one crucial element of the assessment design: the task types to be used on the Alternate ELPAC. A complete report on the pilot utilizing cognitive lab methodology will be produced in the coming months. That report will feature details on the administration (including the sample of participating students), the methodology, the results, and preliminary recommendations.

## Next Steps

The draft test blueprint will be revised accordingly following CDE approval of preliminary recommendations regarding the disposition of task types and item types. The proposed Alternate ELPAC test blueprint will be shared with the California State Board of Education (SBE) for review and approval in May 2020. A final Alternate ELPAC pilot report is anticipated to be brought to the SBE in an Information Memorandum in August 2020.

## Attachment(s)

* Attachment 1: *Preliminary Findings on the Development and Evaluation of Task Types for the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California* (15 Pages)

California Department of Education (CDE) logo. It is round with a few books and an oil light in the middle.



**Preliminary Findings on the Development and Evaluation of Task Types for the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California**

**Contract #CN140284**

**Prepared for the California Department of Education by Educational Testing Service**

**April 9, 2020**



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**Introduction**

Beginning in school year 2020–2021, the Alternate English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) will be the required state test for measuring English language proficiency (ELP) for students who are identified by their individualized education program team as having the most significant cognitive disabilities and eligible for participation in alternate assessments. An evidence-centered design approach was used in designing and developing the Alternate ELPAC, which began in the fall of 2018. Under the direction of the California Department of Education (CDE), testing contractor Educational Testing Service (ETS) has been responsible for executing the design and development of the Alternate ELPAC. This work has been done in consultation with the Alternate ELPAC Test Design Advisory Team (TDAT), the ELPAC Technical Advisory Group (TAG), committees of California educators with expertise in special education and the education of English learners (ELs), and additional stakeholders in the assessment.

The purpose of this preliminary findings report is to document the process used to develop and evaluate one crucial element of the assessment design: the task types to be used on the Alternate ELPAC.[[1]](#footnote-2) The report describes the following elements of the process:

* How the task types were developed on the basis of an analysis of the English Language Development (ELD) Connectors
* How the task types were reviewed by a range of stakeholders, including California educators with appropriate expertise
* How the task types were evaluated during the Alternate ELPAC pilot, using cognitive lab methodology, leading to the confirmation of the appropriateness of the task types included in the proposed test blueprint to be submitted to the California State Board of Education (SBE) for approval

The report is titled a “preliminary findings report” because it is being produced for a specific purpose: to summarize the steps in the development of the task types—along with the preliminary recommendations based on the pilot—to support submission of the proposed test blueprint to the SBE.

A full report on the Alternate ELPAC pilot—including findings beyond those directly related to the task types to be included on the test blueprint—in the coming months. The information in this report, as well as the information in the full report on the pilot, may be used as evidence for technical requirements under peer review pursuant to the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (US Department of Education, 2018).

**Development of the Alternate ELPAC Task Types**

The Alternate ELPAC is designed to align with the *California 2012 English Language Development Standards* (2012 ELD Standards) via the ELD Connectors. The ELD Connectors offer a reduction in the depth, breadth, and complexity of the standards as appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The ELD Connectors were developed by ETS under the direction of the CDE, with input from the Alternate ELPAC TDAT and a comprehensive review by a committee of California educators with expertise in special education and English language instruction. A guiding document for the development of the ELD Connectors was the *Council of Chief State School Officers ELP Standards for English Learners with Significant Cognitive Disabilities 2018*. For details on the development of the ELD Connectors, refer to the *English Language Development Connectors for the Alternate ELPAC Report* (ETS, 2019).

The Alternate ELPAC task types were developed based on the ELD Connectors. The task types were developed by ETS assessment development staff with complementary expertise in two areas of assessment: alternate assessment and ELP assessment. This team began by reviewing existing task types and item types from relevant assessments of ELP—including the ELPAC task types used to assess the ELP of students who have not been identified as having the most significant cognitive disabilities—and the California Alternate Assessment for English language arts/literacy (CAA for ELA), which is used to measure the reading and writing skills of students who have been identified as having the most significant cognitive disabilities.

The top priority in developing the task types was ensuring that the task types would reflect the three test design principles documented in the Alternate ELPAC High-Level Test Design (HLTD):

1. The assessments must be designed to ensure that the intended test-taking population is able to demonstrate their ELP.
2. The test design must be tailored to the range of needs of the students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, including maximum accessibility as well as ensuring linguistic and cultural fairness and sensitivity.
3. The test design must take into consideration the testing burden for students and test examiners.

While both ELPAC and CAA for ELA task and item types provided useful reference points, neither set of existing task and item types were fully appropriate for use in the Alternate ELPAC without adaptation. Among other factors, the ELPAC task and item types needed to be adapted to be appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, and the CAA for ELA task types needed to be adapted to focus on language development (rather than language arts skills) and to be augmented by task types directly assessing Listening and Speaking, which are not assessed on the CAA for ELA.

Two particular factors influenced the design of the task types:

* Because many students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may have their own individually preferred communication modes, the items within the Alternate ELPAC task types are classified more generally as “receptive” or “expressive” rather than more specifically as the Listening, Speaking, Reading, or Writing domains. This allows flexibility for students to respond to test items using the same communication modes that they most commonly use in the classroom.
* Alternate ELPAC task types are categorized in terms of linguistic complexity (low, medium, or high) and are presented in order of increasing complexity to help ensure that all eligible students are able to demonstrate their level of ELP.

Details on the topics of communication modes, receptive and expressive items, and linguistic complexity are included in the *Alternate ELPAC Task Type Specifications* (ETS, 2019) and will be included in the forthcoming Alternate ELPAC proposed test blueprint, which will be submitted to the SBE at the May 2020 SBE meeting for consideration.

The development of the task types proceeded iteratively over a period of months, with CDE staff providing reviews and with the TDAT providing periodic input, particularly on questions of how to most appropriately instantiate the principles of test design documented in the Alternate ELPAC High-Level Test Design (HLTD). Based on both the first Alternate ELPAC Item Writing Workshop, held in April 2019, and the first Item Review Meeting, held in July 2019, a committee of California educators provided thorough reviews and significant conceptual input into the development of the task types.

The outcome of this task design and development effort was the creation of eight Alternate ELPAC task types that served as the basis of item development for the pilot.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Table 1 provides the names and a brief description of each of these task types as administered in the pilot. In accordance with the Alternate ELPAC HLTD, all the task types are integrated; that is, each task type includes a stimulus that is followed by one or more receptive (Listening, Reading) items and by one or more expressive (Speaking, Writing) items. Full details on the task types will be brought to the SBE in a May 2020 SBE Item.

Table 1. Alternate ELPAC Task Types Included in Pilot

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Task Type Name | Description |
| Recognize and Use Common Words | The student observes one to three photos of common nouns or objects. (If a student has a visual impairment, the test examiner gives the student real objects or manipulatives.) The student responds to one receptive item and one expressive item about the objects. |
| Communicate About Familiar Topics | The student is presented with a brief story of one to three sentences about a familiar topic. A photo or illustration is included for context and support. The student responds to one receptive item and one expressive item about the familiar topic. |
| Understand a School Activity | The student is presented with a story related to a familiar classroom- or school-based activity, event, or procedure. The student responds to two receptive and two expressive items about the stimulus. |
| Understand a School Exchange | The student is presented with a story related to a school or classroom activity with at least two characters. The student responds to one receptive item and three expressive items about the stimulus. |
| Describe a Routine | The student is presented with a story related to a familiar school or classroom routine. The student responds to two receptive items and one expressive item about the stimulus. |
| Understand and Express an Opinion | The student is presented with a story that describes a situation in which two or more characters make a choice and they give one or more reasons or facts for the choice. The student responds to three receptive items and one expressive item about the stimulus. |
| Interact with a Literary Text | The student is presented with a literary story on a familiar topic. The student responds to one receptive item and three expressive items about the stimulus. |
| Interact with an Informational Text | The student is presented with an informational passage on a familiar or unfamiliar topic. The student responds to two receptive and two expressive items about the stimulus. |

**Evaluation of the Alternate ELPAC Task Types via Pilot Using Cognitive Labs Methodology**

A key step in the development of the Alternate ELPAC task types was their evaluation through administering them to students representative of those who will take the Alternate ELPAC. The Alternate ELPAC pilot was administered to students in schools across California January 14–30, 2020, in order to examine student response and test examiner interactions.

A sampling plan was developed, which included a variety of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities (ELSCDs) and background characteristics which included a variety of home languages and primary disabilities. A student background questionnaire was used to screen students to find those who best fit the characteristics of interest. The observed sample size was a total of 71 students with significant cognitive disabilities, of whom 58 were designated ELs and 13 were non-ELs. Table 2 summarizes the sample of participating students by grade or grade span and by type of student.

Table 2. Sample of Students Participating in Pilot

| **Grade Level or Grade Span** | **K** | **1** | **2** | **3–5** | **6–8** | **9–12** | **Total** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ELSCDs | 7 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 55 |
| ELSCD Newcomer Status | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| SCD (non-EL) | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| Total | 13 | 12 | 12 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 71 |

The three goals of the Alternate ELPAC pilot were to accomplish the following:

1. Examine test examiner and student interaction with proposed task types to determine whether the task types elicit the intended knowledge and skills without construct-irrelevant interference
2. Collect evidence of the use of accessibility resources during test administration and determine whether the test design supports access
3. Examine test administration practices to determine whether the assessment is administered with fidelity, which will inform future refinement and recommendations for the field test.

As noted in the introduction, a complete report on the pilot will be created in the coming months. That report will include details on the administration (including information on the sample of participating students), the methodology, and results for all three goals.

Because the population for the pilot was highly susceptible to study attrition, the target was oversampled to obtain double the number of returned consent forms needed across three regional areas in California (northern, central, and southern). A deliberate sampling plan included a variety of ELs with significant cognitive disabilities and background characteristics.

The student background questionnaire was used to screen for students to who best fit the sampling matrix, including the following characteristics of interest: home languages; range of performance and communication modes (symbolic, presymbolic, and emergent communicators); newcomer status; country of birth; primary disability; special education setting; previous ELA performance on CAAs for students in grades three and up; experience with using testing compatible devices; and ELD services.

The cognitive lab process relied on the expert judgment of educators familiar with the students to administer the pilot form and provide their ratings of student performance on the items. Data was collected to provide evidence of how students interacted and responded to each task type to determine whether the items elicited the intended responses, which included examining the communication mode(s) used by students to respond to items designed to measure receptive or expressive skills. Test examiners collected evidence of student interaction and response modes for each pilot item during the test administration. Special attention and additional time were provided for students in kindergarten through grade two and any newcomers who were unfamiliar users of technology and had not yet been exposed to formal testing procedures.

The preliminary findings on task types presented here are based on the test examiner ratings provided during the test administration, embedded in the *Directions for Administration* (*DFAs*) and research observational data. Data analysis is ongoing and will be part of the final report, scheduled for delivery to the CDE in June 2020.

Because this advance summary is focused on findings of the pilot that will impact the task types and the submission of the proposed test blueprint to the SBE, the discussion here will be limited to the first goal presented above, centering on students’ interaction with the task types. The following research questions were used to investigate this topic:

* Do the task types gather appropriate evidence about the students’ English language skills?
* Are the task types appropriate for the target population?
* Do the task types measure the intended response process? If not, how can that be improved?
* What are the communication modes used to respond to the task types?

These four research questions will now each be discussed in turn, with preliminary data presented for each area of investigation.

**Did the task types gather appropriate evidence about the students’ English language skills?**

In the initial review of the pilot data, it was found that the task types gathered appropriate evidence about students’ English language skills. Students identified at a beginning level of ELP by their teachers were not able to correctly answer most items at the medium to high linguistic complexity levels. Conversely, students who were English only or ELs with a high level of ELP, as categorized by their teachers, did quite well on the pilot test. The performance on the task types was found by test examiners to be commensurate with the ELP demonstrated by the same students during instruction. For example, Maria (a pseudonym), an EL who enrolled thirteen months ago, is at a beginner level of ELP, is verbal in Spanish (up to three words) and was not able to demonstrate ELP at higher levels of linguistic complexity. Maria was able to point to answers for items on the task type Recognize and Use Common Words.

Test examiners provided ratings of the task types after the administration of each task type. This preliminary data is not reflective of the entire data set, which has not yet been fully analyzed. Two task types had the highest level of agreement: (1) Recognize and Use Common Words at 100 percent (kindergarten, grade two, and grades six through eight) and (2) Interact with an Informational Text at 83 percent (kindergarten) and 100 percent (grade two and grades six through eight). Task types with the lowest agreement were Understand a School Exchange at 50 percent (grades nine through twelve), Communicate About a Familiar Topic at 54 percent (grade one), and Understand a School Exchange at 58 percent (grade one). A preliminary examination of the data indicates that low agreements from test examiners are associated with students who are presymbolic users and who needed items that included objects and more pictures and response options for expressive items. All other remaining task types across all grades and grade bands ranged from 70 to 100 percent agreements.

In accordance with the Alternate ELPAC High Level Test Design, task types on the pilot test were organized in increasing level of language complexity (low, medium, and high). Test examiners provided ratings for each of the task types and corresponding level of language complexity. For kindergarten, task type agreements were Recognize and Use Common Words (100 percent), Understand a School Activity (75 percent), Describe a Routine (83 percent), and Interact with an Informational Text (83 percent). Grade one task type agreements were Communicate About Familiar Topics (54 percent), Understand a School Exchange (58 percent), Understand and Express an Opinion (92 percent), and Interact with a Literary text (92 percent). Grade two agreements were Recognize and Use Common Words (100 percent), Understand a School Activity (100 percent), Understand and Express an Opinion (92 percent), and Interact with an Informational Text (100 percent). Grade span three through five task type agreements were Communicate About Familiar Topics (100 percent), Understand a School Exchange (100 percent), Understand and Express an Opinion (77 percent), and Interact with a Literary Text (77 percent). Grade span six through eight task type agreements were Recognize and Use Common Words (100 percent), Understand a School Activity (82 percent), Describe a Routine (100 percent), and Interact with an Informational Text (100 percent). Grade span nine through twelve task type agreements were Communicate About Familiar Topics (100 percent), Understand a School Exchange (50 percent), Understand and Express an Opinion (70 percent), and Interact with a Literary Text (91 percent).

**Were the task types appropriate for the target population?**

Overall, the task types across grades and grade bands were found to be appropriate. Teachers spoke positively about the task types and the progression of task types (e.g., “The task types are great!” and “This is the best alternate assessment I’ve ever given, very accessible”). A few test examiners did note, though, that the progression of language complexity was too rapid for a number of students as they moved from low to medium task types. Test examiners found the task type Recognize and Use Common Words provided students a valuable opportunity to demonstrate their ELP at the lowest level of linguistic complexity. Test examiners believe this task type could improve test participation on the assessment, especially for students who were performing at low levels of linguistic complexity, nonsymbolic learners, and students with sensory deficits.

Based on this preliminary analysis there are three preliminary findings and recommendations below.

**Finding:** The inclusion of Recognize and Use Common Words as an initial task type across all grades and grade spans would create a more gradual progression for students and provide more information about the student's ability to take the assessment. This is an important consideration for providing access to students who are performing at low levels of linguistic complexity and developing language.

**Recommendation 1:** Adjust the draft test blueprint by adding Recognize and Use Common Words as a new first task type. In order to keep test length as proposed, reduce the number of Communicate About Familiar Topics sets on the blueprint from two sets to one set.

**Finding:** Students had difficulty understanding the directions for the multiple-selection multiple-choice item type within the Understand and Express an Opinion task type. This item type provided students with three options and asked them to select the two that were correct.

**Recommendation 2:** Remove the multiple-selection multiple-choice item type and replace it with an item in the more familiar single-selection multiple-choice format.

*Note*: Because this change involves replacing a two-point item with a one-point item, the overall number of items on the blueprint will remain the same, while the number of score points will decrease by one. Increasing the number of items is not recommended because sufficient score points remain to support intended score reporting, and there is a compelling interest from the field not to lengthen the test.

**Finding:** In the Interact with an Informational Text task type, test examiners were mixed in their reaction to an item type designed to assess connectors aligned with Part III: Using Foundational Literacy Skills, which was planned for use at kindergarten, grade one, grade two, and grades three through five. Some test examiners found that this item type assessed the foundational literacy skills in a manner similar to how they teach such skills in the classroom; however, other test examiners reported that the approach in this item type did not correspond to their classroom practice. Of particular concern was the fact that some kindergarten and grade one students in the Alternate ELPAC population may not have had an opportunity to learn the skills assessed by this item type.

**Recommendation 3:** For kindergarten and grade one, replace the Interact with an Informational Text item aligned with the Part III connector with an item aligned with another connector assessed in the same task type, such as Part I.B.5–Part I.B.6, Part II.A.1, or Part II.A.2. For grade two and grades three through five, maintain the item aligned to the Part III connector, but look for possible modifications to the item that will make it correspond to as broad a range of instructional styles as possible.

*Note*: As with Recommendation 2, this change involves (for the grades involved) replacing a two-point item with a one-point item; as a result, the overall number of items on the blueprint will remain the same, while the number of score points will decrease by one. Increasing the number of items is not recommended because sufficient score points remain to support intended score reporting, and there is a compelling interest from the field not to lengthen the test. (After both Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 3 are implemented, the score points for each test form will be 30–32, as opposed to a range of 30–34 score points for the previous draft of the test blueprint.)

**Additional recommendations:**

* Consider some minor adjustments to the task types, including addressing alternate response options for expressive items to be more inclusive for students who are nonverbal and students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices.
* Consider including guidance for increasing the number of objects and manipulatives for students who are nonsymbolic communicators.

**Did the task types measure the intended response process? If not, how can that be improved?**

Overall, test examiners found that the task types measured receptive or expressive skills appropriately across the grades and grade spans. Test examiners indicated that measurement targets strongly aligned with receptive skills (Listening and Reading) and aligned with expressive skills (Speaking and Writing). A few test examiners were not sure whether Writing was included with expressive measurement targets. Expressive items did have some limitations for students who were nonverbal and presymbolic communicators. Test examiners requested more response options to include realia, manipulatives, or objects for presymbolic communicators and to provide additional picture support for AAC users.

**What were the communication modes students used to respond to the task types?**

Students used a full range of communication modes. Approximately half of the students participating in the pilot were verbal students. Nonverbal students and students with multiple disabilities and visual impairment had limitations in responding to expressive items and accessing text-only items. Test examiners noted that open-ended expressive items could be made accessible to nonverbal students if objects or picture cards (or comparable response options) were provided. In this study, no student responded in braille or in writing. The following communication modes were used (listed in order of frequency): verbal, three words or complete sentences; verbal, two-word responses, phrases; verbal, one-word responses; vocalizations; gestures (e.g., pointing, nodding, touching, arranging); AAC devices; eye gaze; and American Sign Language or other signed response (e.g., Signed Exact English).

**Next Steps in the Alternate ELPAC Assessment Design Process**

This advance summary report has been developed to provide explanation and support for the SBE’s consideration of the *Alternate ELPAC Proposed Test Blueprint* (ETS, 2020). That proposed test blueprint, along with the supporting document, *Definitions of Task Types for the Alternate ELPAC* (ETS, 2020)*,* will be submitted to the SBE at the May 2020 SBE meeting. After the May 2020 SBE meeting, a complete report on the pilot study will be developed, providing details on test administration, including information on the sample of students participating, the methodology, and the results for all study goals.

Once approved by the SBE, the *Alternate ELPAC Test Blueprint* will serve as the basis for developing items and test forms for the 2020–2021 Alternate ELPAC operational field test and for subsequent forms of the Initial Alternate ELPAC and the Summative Alternate ELPAC.

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1. On the Alternate ELPAC, the term “task type” is used to describe the tasks that are used to gather evidence of student ELP. Each Alternate ELPAC task type includes a stimulus and multiple items. This is in contrast to the term “item type,” which is used to describe test items as categorized according to their properties in the item banking system and the test delivery system, including response modes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. While the development of the proposed test blueprint led to the assumption that six task types would be sufficient for operational use, eight task types were developed, on the advice of the ELPAC TAG, for administration in the pilot, allowing for some flexibility in adjusting the test blueprint in case one or two task types were found to be unsuitable for administration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)