

CREATING AN ACADEMIC SPOKEN ENGLISH PRACTICE TEST: PREPARING STUDENTS AND TEACHERS FOR K-12 ONLINE ORAL ASSESSMENTS

JEANNE BECK

Iowa State University

KATT SIMMS

Ritenour High School

ABSTRACT

With many students taking computer-based English proficiency assessments like the WIDA ACCESS for ELLs, teachers must not only prepare students for the demands of producing academic English for an oral assessment but also to help their students utilize computers to comprehend the material and record their speech. Other than practice tests provided by testing companies, few practice tests and materials are readily available online for teachers and students. In this paper, we will discuss the creation and dissemination of a practice spoken English test, which utilizes Google Sites and Flipgrid, highlighting the partnership between the researcher (first author) and ESOL teacher (second author). The process for creating the test, which was loosely modeled off of WIDA's ACCESS for ELLs, will be discussed. Furthermore, the current ESOL teacher's perception of the practice test's usefulness will be shared as well as implications for future researcher-teacher collaboration in EL assessment.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher turned doctoral student, one of my greatest accomplishments is making something you wished you would have had as an ESOL teacher and sharing it with current educators. This project's humble beginnings began in fall 2020, thanks to the course *Computer Aided Language Testing* at Iowa State University. Tasked with creating a functional test for language learners, I, the first author, immediately thought back to my last job in Spring 2019 as a middle school ESOL teacher in rural Missouri. Every year teachers gear up for the federally-mandated English language assessment tests, scrambling to find the time and resources to prepare their students. Chatting with a longtime ESOL teacher friend, the second author, she revealed that students attended both in-person and online learning due to COVID-19:

In my high school, student schedules are a mix of in person and virtual this year. They meet with their teacher twice a week in-person and are responsible for completing any online assignments posted on their asynchronous days. The schedule is set up in an ABABV format, where students in the A group come to school/log on for classes Mondays and Wednesdays, while B-group students do the same but on Tuesdays and Thursdays; on Fridays all classes are attended virtually. Students attend one day of odd classes and one day of even classes (via block scheduling).

With such a dynamic schedule, it was evident that not only did teachers need resources, but they also needed resources that would be usable regardless of learning modality.

CREATING THE TEST

The need for test preparation materials for the federally-mandated English tests has been a long time need for teachers, especially in the realms of speaking and listening practice. Providing useful practice materials for teachers can prove difficult, however, with states using a variety of EL assessments. Within MIDTESOL's region alone, states have adopted three different EL assessments: Missouri uses WIDA's ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 (Missouri Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.), Kansas has created KELPA (Kansas State Department of Education, 2020), and Iowa and Nebraska utilize ELPA21 (Iowa Department of Education, 2021; Nebraska Department of Education, 2021). Since the largest number of states use WIDA's ACCESS for ELLs test (WIDA consortium, 2020), and both authors have teaching experience in Missouri (a WIDA consortium state), we opted to model the practice test loosely after WIDA's assessment.

Keeping in mind what technology resources are available to K-12 teachers, the practice test would need to be on platforms that teachers were familiar with, adaptable to the teachers' and students' specific needs, usable in-person or online, and at no cost. The researcher needed a platform that would allow for creating a test-like environment, embed audio, and provide a recording apparatus. Considering the use of Google Sites and Flipgrid, the second author confirmed that she regularly used Flipgrid at her school and that it is teacher-friendly for those who may have never used Flipgrid before. While she had never used Google Sites, she believed it would be acceptable since teachers use multiple G Suite apps while teaching.

Deciding to include three test items with two speaking prompts each, the researcher wrote the following test items: an academic-English item called *School Clubs*, a history/biography-related item about *John Lewis*, and an environmental science-related item on *Zebra Mussels*. While both authors have Missouri K-12 ESOL certification, we geared the test items towards middle/high school level learners of intermediate-levels, as those were the teaching contexts we were most familiar with, while also ensuring that the *School Clubs* prompts would be suitable for upper elementary students and lower-level learners. Modeling these items off of the WIDA ACCESS Test Demo materials ([WIDA Test Demo](#), n.d.), each item contains

several turns where the “teacher” introduces content, a model “student” provides model answers, and the test taker is prompted to record their own responses twice. Writing the test items was harder than initially anticipated; since large-scale English proficiency assessments cannot assume that students have learned a particular concept, test items need to be informative yet also provide space for the student to demonstrate their ability to take part in an academic conversation.

Using Google Sites, royalty-free images, and self-created art, the researcher created a template page with the teacher and model student icons, a placeholder for an audio button, a text placeholder for the spoken dialogue to be presented in written form, a placeholder for an image related to the discussion, and a “next” button to move the student forward. This page was then duplicated multiple times, adding audio, text, and images for each page. Each page was linked to the next and “hidden” so students could not skip ahead when taking the test.

Example
the practice
the “teacher”
providing
On
where
record
themselves, a
image was
and if the

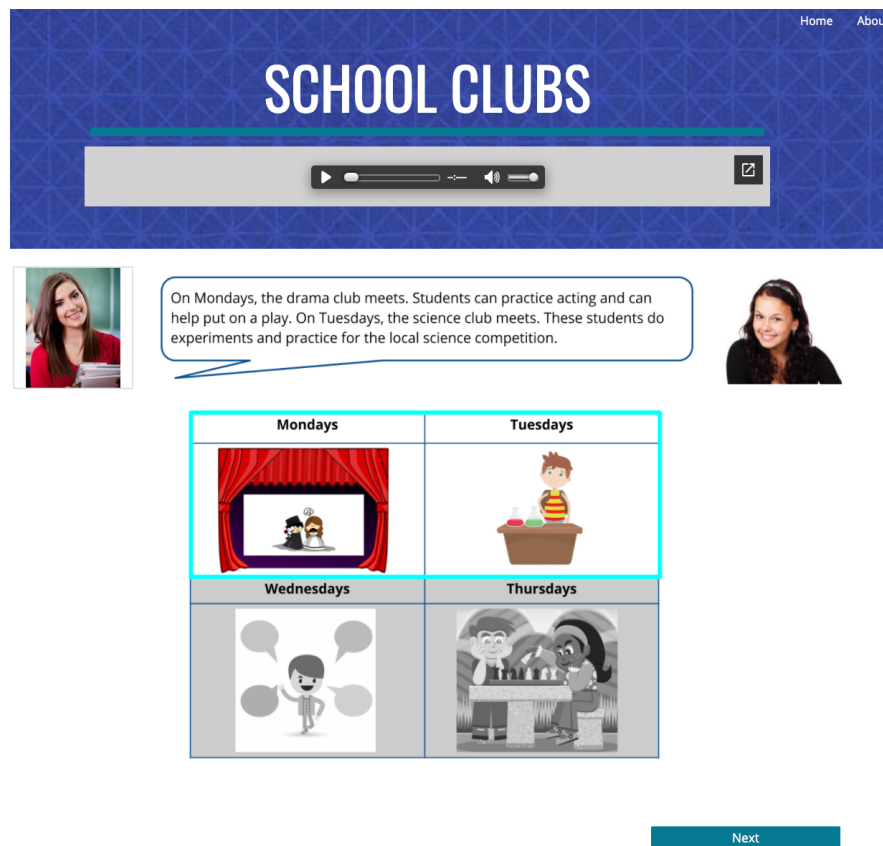


Figure 1.
page of
test with
(on left)
content
pages
students
relevant
included,
prompt

was the final prompt of the test item, buttons to the home page and other questions were provided. Originally, the goal was to embed a working version of Flipgrid into each of these pages so that the students' test experience would be contained within the Google Site; however,

ZEBRA MUSSELS

Now it's your turn. Explain to me step by step how zebra mussels change where energy or food is located in a body of water.

[Click Here to Answer this Question in Flipgrid](#)

Effects of Zebra Mussels on Food and Energy

1. Zebra mussels eat floating algae

2. Bottom feeders eat


3. Less food in the water

Home Part I: School Clubs Part II: John Lewis Works Cited

the researcher was unable to get Flipgrid to work in this manner, perhaps due to the site's internal configurations. Instead, the researcher added a *Click Here to Answer this Question in Flipgrid* button and provided instructions in the [Test Manual](#) for teachers to link their own Flipgrid pages or provide their own directions. Overall, this limitation became a strength as it increased adaptability for teachers while potentially reducing teacher anxiety; teachers only need to change the button's link instead of messing with the page layout to add their own Flipgrid.

Figure 2. Example page of the practice test where the test taker records their response

Directions and materials (i.e. image files and test prompts) are provided in the Test Manual as well as in a [subfolder](#); teachers who choose to use Flipgrid have step-by-step instructions and materials so that their Flipgrid prompts can mirror the practice test’s aesthetic.



Discussion

Create Groups for your learning communities and add Topics to start the discussion.

Groups
Topics

Topics (6)

Topics are where participants view and record their videos.

Add a Topic













Title	Group	Latest Activity			
 <p>School Clubs Question 1 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 
 <p>Zebra Mussels Question 1 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 
 <p>Zebra Mussels Question 2 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 
 <p>John Lewis Question 1 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 
 <p>John Lewis Question 2 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 
 <p>School Clubs Question 2 0 Responses</p>	Add to Group	-	Active ▾	Share	Actions ▾ 

Figure 3: Screenshot of practice test prompts in Flipgrid

PILOTING THE TEST

After the first version of the test was complete, the second author took the test herself to test its usability. She provided invaluable feedback and also volunteered to be the voice of the model student, providing audio clips for each of the model student prompts. The teacher later piloted the test with her students in class and shared the following information and observations:

Given the weekly schedule and style of attendance, the need for a virtual version of a test that mimics the ACCESS test was very beneficial for my students. The website can be set up to meet the needs of the students where all can participate. And because of the

question styles, it is also helpful to have an extended period of time where students can work and ask questions. Students have experience using the Flipgrid format, so jumping from using the Google Site to Flipgrid was an easy switch. If someone decides to change the recording site for students, it is easily adaptable to change the directions and links since teachers have their own copy of the test site. The questions lined up well with the content courses most students have difficulty with- social studies and science.

Reviewing the teacher's notes, the researcher refined the [Test Manual](#) for teachers with step-by-step instructions on how to make a copy of the test, how to insert links to a teacher's personal Flipgrid, and advice for implementing the test in class, grading ideas, and a sample rubric.

SHARING THE TEST WITH TEACHERS NEAR AND FAR

After seeing a request for test preparation materials from another ESOL teacher on the Advocating for ELLs Facebook group, the researcher shared the test with the group (Advocating for ELLs, 2021). Sharing a [Google drive folder](#) which includes a copy of the practice test Google Site, the test manual, and test prompts to cut and paste into Flipgrid, the initial post received numerous likes and numerous reshares. The teacher shared the materials with her school and professional networks as well.

Expecting constructive feedback, we were overwhelmed by the amount of appreciation and support from teachers all across the United States. The Facebook group and test manual became avenues for teachers to directly reach the researcher and receive support on getting their test to work. In some cases, we learned that some districts do not allow Google Sites to be used (using a private Gmail or changing Google Site settings were workarounds). Solutions were added to the manual, making it an organic and living document.

Checking the folder and Facebook group every few days, we were curious who had used the test. While we will never know how many teachers and students it reached (or how many students were subjected to our voice acting!), we have received replies from multiple states, from middle schools, high schools, and even church groups in rural, suburban, and urban settings, from WIDA and non-WIDA consortium states, from rural Missouri to New York City.

TIPS FOR USING THE TEST

One downside of having the test shared as a Google Folder and relying on teachers to make their own copy of the test is that less tech savvy teachers can run into difficulties. Even the second author, a proficient technology user, ran into issues with her district's IT offices. As such, she provides some tips and lessons learned for using the practice items with students and publishing the site:

Review the website with the students first. It is best to show how the website works and what they will need to do when working on their own. Do *School Clubs* together so they can practice following along and knowing how to connect to *Flipgrid* and record their voice. When publishing the teacher's copy of the website, be sure to make it public or for your district only. This can be done by completing the following steps:

1. Next to *publish* button, there is a dropdown arrow. Click the arrow
2. Under the *who can view my site*, click *Manage*
3. At the bottom, you will see links, click on *Change*
4. For the published section, choose either your *DISTRICT* or *Public*
5. When done, click *Publish*.

Additional tips can be found in the [Test Manual](#).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Creating the Spoken English Practice Test was a rewarding and eye-opening experience for both researcher and teacher. While the researcher has previously taught, working with a current teacher provided grounding to make sure the end result was something that would be of use to current teachers and students. As academic articles can be seen as “out of touch” with the reality of K-12 teaching (see Montgomery & Smith, 2015), creating direct teacher-researcher partnerships, especially with K-12 educators, is crucial for our field.

As this practice test only included three items, the second author provides the following limitations:

For lower level students, *School Clubs* was easy to follow, but the language became more difficult in the later sections, even within the recorded text. It would be beneficial to create tiered versions (like WIDA ACCESS levels A, B/C) so teachers can better prepare newcomer and low-level English speakers. Perhaps the addition of a math section could be created as well. That said, for intermediate and advanced students, this was a wonderful tool to review content language.

Moving forward, the researcher’s desire is to utilize my future coursework in second language assessment to create additional speaking test items or a listening practice test as a means to help current teachers and students. Our hope is that other ESOL teachers will work side-by-side with researchers to foster teacher-researcher connections. If you are a K-12 ESOL teacher, feel free to use [our practice test](#) and reach out if you have suggestions for future collaboration.

THE AUTHORS

Jeanne Beck is a doctoral student at Iowa State University. She has taught undergraduate, graduate, and teacher training courses in South Korea; high school English learners on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program; and ESL, ELA, and technology classes in rural K-12 Missouri schools. Her interests include EL assessment, project-based learning, CALL, technology training for teachers, and rural EL needs. She has presented at TESOL, MIDTESOL, JALT-CALL, and has written for Language Assessment, Language Magazine, and co-authored an English writing textbook for Korean learners. She can be reached at beckje@iastate.edu.

Katt Simms is an ESL teacher at Ritenour High School in St. Louis, Missouri. She has worked for language companies and private schools in both South Korea and Japan, teaching English as a Second Language to students in the K-12 school system up to undergraduates and adults. After teaching abroad for several years, she earned her MA in TESOL from Webster University while working as a Teacher's Assistant in ESL in the Parkway School District, St. Louis. She is passionate about her students' continued development with the English language and the advocacy of their learning needs here in the States.

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