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## U.S. history state assessments, discourse demands, and English Learners' achievement: Evidence for the importance of reading and writing instruction in U.S. history for English Learners<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

States are beginning to restructure their U.S. history assessments from previous multiple-choice based assessments to include written-response questions that have higher levels of academic language demands. These higher-order thinking and analytical items pose challenges to linguistically and culturally diverse students. The purpose of the current study is to investigate how the restructuring of a U.S. history state assessment is associated with English Learners' (ELs) achievement over time. The author incorporates 3 years of data from the Tennessee Department of Education, and utilizes multi-level modeling (Hierarchical Linear Modeling) to examine and compare the association between school percentage ELs and U.S. history achievement on Tennessee's (TN) U.S. history state assessment. Findings indicate that the restructuring of the TN U.S. history state assessment in the 2015–16 school year is significantly and inversely associated with ELs' achievement on this assessment. At the same time, there are no significant associations for the 2012–13 and the 2013–14 school years. This suggests a negative inverse association between the restructuring of the TN U.S. history state assessment and ELs' performance. In addition, this suggests that ELs' lack of U.S. history reading and writing ability may have contributed to the negative association.

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### Introduction

The Race To The Top (RTTT) competitive grant process encouraged a majority of states to restructure their standards and assessments (McGuinn, 2012) to align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Many states bidding for RTTT grants used the CCSS for Literacy in U.S. History/Social Studies as a guide to restructure their 11<sup>th</sup>-grade U.S. history state standards and their state assessments (Reisman, 2015). The CCSS for Literacy in U.S. History/Social Studies includes writing skills that encourage students to write arguments focused on social studies disciplinary content (p. 64) and reading skills such as citing "...specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources...", determining "...the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source..." and evaluating "...various explanations for actions or events..." (CCSS, 2010, p. 61).

The purpose of this restructuring is to encourage the instruction of inquiry and interpretation skills rather than memorization and retention skills (Reisman, 2015), which have predominated U.S. history classroom instruction (Grant & Salinas, 2008; Vogler, 2006). Many states are restructuring their state assessments from multiple-choice item exams to exams that

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include items focused on evaluating inquiry and interpretation skills, such as Document-Based Questions (DBQs), thematic essays, written-response items, extended-response items, and constructive-response items (Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), 2016; Martin, Maldonado, Schneider, & Smith, 2011; Ohio Department of Education (ODE), 2016; Reisman, 2015; Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), 2015a). The restructuring of U.S. history state assessments may increase the linguistic complexity of these exams and have unintended consequences for linguistically and culturally diverse student populations (Abedi & Diatal, 2004; Abedi, Leon, & Mirocha, 2005; Bailey, 2005; Menken, 2008).

The linguistic complexity of state assessment items poses notable challenges for linguistically and culturally diverse student populations such as English Learners (ELs<sup>1</sup>; Abedi & Diatal, 2004; Bailey, 2005; Menken, 2008, 2010; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). One way of measuring the linguistic complexity of state assessments is by examining the academic language demand of the assessment items used in these assessments (Bailey, 2005; Menken, 2008). Bailey (2005) describes three levels of academic language demand, lexical (i.e., vocabulary), syntactic (i.e., grammar and sentence structure), and discourse (i.e., connecting multiple sentences to correctly answer the item). Multiple-choice questions are examples of assessment items that have lexical- and syntactic-level demands because of the academic vocabulary and understanding of grammar and sentence structure required to answer the questions correctly. DBQs, thematic essays, constructive-response items, extended-response items, and written-response items are examples of assessment items that have lexical-, syntactic-, and discourse-level demands. These assessment items increase the level of academic language demand because students must understand academic vocabulary and sentence structure, connect multiple sentences, and create arguments from multiple documents.

The Tennessee (TN) 11th-grade U.S. history state assessment, the TN U.S. history End-of-Course exam (TN U.S. history EOC), is taken by all high school students at the conclusion of the U.S. history course and is part of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). In the 2015-16 school year, the TN U.S. history EOC was restructured from an exam that included 50 multiple-choice items to an exam that included a written component and a 48-item multiple-choice component (TDOE, 2015a). The salient change in the 2015-16 TN U.S. history EOC was the new extended-response component that asked “students to write an essay based on stimuli such as maps, primary source documents and informational texts” (TDOE, 2015a, p. 2). The description of the new extended-response component aligns with linguistically complex assessment items that have lexical, syntactic, and discourse demands, which require students to decipher, interpret, and then craft an argument from a long passage or multiple documents (Bailey, 2005; Menken, 2008). The TN U.S. history EOC’s restructuring in the 2015-16 school year increased the discourse demand of the state assessment.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the addition of a discourse demanding U.S. history assessment item was associated with ELs’ achievement levels; this study answers the call for more rigorous research in regard to linguistically and culturally diverse students’ performance on social studies standards-based state-level exams (Grant & Salinas, 2008; Heafner & Fitchett, 2015). It is important to explore ELs’ achievement on new state history exams for several reasons. First, states have been restructuring their U.S. history state assessments from multiple-choice item exams to include DBQs, thematic essays, constructed-response items, written-response items, and extended-response items (KDE, 2016; Martin et al., 2011; ODE, 2016; Reisman, 2015; TDOE, 2015a). Second, the EL population is growing and, as a result, more districts, schools, and U.S. history teachers will be instructing this population (OELA, 2015a; U.S. Department of Education (USDoe), 2006; USDoe, 2013). Third, high-stakes accountability is attached to the TN U.S. history EOC. In TN, the U.S. history EOC is a student graduation requirement and scores on the exam may influence teacher evaluations (TDOE, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

This study is operationalized through the following research question:

1. To what extent is there a change in the association between percentage ELs and U.S. history achievement, at the school level, between 2012-13 and 2015-16 with the addition of a writing component on the TN U.S. history EOC?

## Literature review

### *Linguistic complexity within state assessments and ELs’ achievement*

The most recent data presented by USDoe’s Office of English Language Acquisition indicates that nationally, for the 2011-12 school year, roughly nine percent of K-12 students were ELs (OELA, 2015a), and five percent of high school students were ELs (OLEA, 2015b). In addition, between the 2004-05 and 2011-12 school years, 38 states have seen a 1 to 200 percent increase in this population (OELA, 2015a). These statistics suggest that teachers, schools, and districts are increasingly educating more ELs and that a larger percentage of ELs are required to take U.S. history EOCs in order to graduate from high school.

<sup>1</sup> Prominent scholars have encouraged the use of “emergent bilingual” or “multilingual” in place of the terms English learner and English language learner, as English learner and English language learner do not take into account students’ bilingual or multilingual resources (Bunch, Kibler, Pimentel, & Walqui, 2012; Garcia & Kleifgan, 2010). However, in describing this student population, I follow the same logic as Bunch, Kibler, and Pimentel (2012). The term “EL” “... references the ways in which schools, districts, and states, categorize these learners according to federal and state guidelines” (Bunch et al., 2012, p. 2). As a result, I use the term “EL” throughout the paper.

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