Assessing English Language Proficiency in the United States

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Abstract

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ushered in a series of important changes for the education of students classified as English language learners, including greater attention to achievement and equity through mandated evaluation and reporting on the part of districts and states of student subgroups. This feature of the ESEA reauthorization and the role of high-stakes testing in general has fueled extensive discussions of educational reform in the years since NCLB, continuing into the present day when the accountability requirements of NCLB are coupled with the benchmarks and assessments set forth in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). While the CCSS and their accompanying assessments strive to address early criticisms of NCLB such as the narrowing of curriculum, states have also had to develop or adopt new standards for *English as a second language* (most frequently referred to as English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards). These state ELP Standards are an essential and defining element of the education of English language learners (ELLs) in the context of the CCSS for the foreseeable future and will dictate exactly how learning English is defined for this population, whether a common definition of English language learners can be established, and the degree to which the United States can provide a first-class

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E. Shohamy et al. (eds.), *Language Testing and Assessment*, Encyclopedia of Language and Education, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-02261-1_30

education for students who range from emergent to accomplished multicompetent users of two languages.

Keywords

English language learners • Assessment • English Language Proficiency Standards

Contents

Introduction

Pending implementation of state-level plans for evaluation and accountability under the newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) came about in 2001, also known as The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Among its many revisions from previous iterations of the ESEA, originally conceived to provide federal support to students in poverty, was an emphasis on accountability marked by yearly testing and benchmarks for all students to reach proficiency by 2014. While NCLB addresses far more than testing (No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 2002), these mandates are the most concrete and tangible for students, teachers, and parents on a daily basis, especially those classified as English language learners (ELL).

In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers issued the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), developed with support from researchers and foundations. The new focus on college and career readiness increased the cognitive and linguistic demands compared to most existing state standards. These standards did not affect the accountability requirements of NCLB, but, for states that voluntarily adopted

CCSS to secure additional federal funding for their schools, it did supplant the standards that had been in place. To date, 44 states and the District of Columbia have adopted CCSS, and other states have either adopted the new standards in part or adapted their earlier standards to better align with college and career readiness benchmarks.

In the case of ELLs, a category of students growing in both number and proportion among American public school enrollments (currently, 9.2%, or 4.4 million students (NCES 2015)), both NCLB and CCSS (and potentially ESSA, depending on how states design their English language development trajectories and assessments) create serious equity and opportunity challenges. Under the provisions of NCLB and the new ESSA, states must monitor the academic achievement of ELLs to ensure that they acquire both the English language and the subject-matter competence attained by their English-speaking peers.

Early Developments

ELL Classification and NCLB

ELL became an officially recognized category in American federal policy through the 1978 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which included provisions for students with "limited English proficiency" (LEP). NCLB likewise provided an explicit and complex definition of the category that includes age, grade level and key student characteristics (e.g., students whose native language is not English, who are born outside the United States, who are Native American or Alaska Native, who come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on their level of English proficiency, or who come from an environment where a language other than English is dominant). In part D of the definition, the challenges experienced by the types of students who are to be included in the category are described as involving: difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English *which are sufficient to prevent them* from achieving on State assessments, successfully achieving in classrooms, or participating fully in society (NCLB 2002). NCLB required states to report on ELLs' achievement separately and to focus efforts on closing the existing educational achievement gap.

NCLB mandated all states to develop a process that screens and identifies children entering American schools as English language learners, classifies then into levels of ELL proficiency, and determines when and whether they can be reclassified as fluent English proficient (FEP). Each state was required (1) to establish or adopt English language proficiency (ELP) standards for all students identified as non-English-background students, (2) to develop an English language proficiency assessment aligned with the state's ELP standards, and (3) to establish criteria that identify when students have met the required level of English proficiency for reclassification as English proficient. These requirements remain under the ESSA,

albeit with increased requirements for statewide standardization of criteria and procedures for ELL classification and redesignation as English-proficient.

NCLB and Identified Challenges

From the outset, the assessment of ELLs emerged as a key criticism of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Given that schools failing to meet annual benchmarks (known as Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP) face penalties such as loss of federal funding or forced turnover of school's administration and staff, students' scores on state tests were (and continue to be) a central concern. This issue drew attention to existing achievement gaps, instructional practices, and learning environments that characterize schooling for many ELLs. While some rightfully praise this heightened attention to inequities, the subsequent explanations for disparities were (and are) oversimplified. Gándara and Contreras (2009) note how language proficiency and ethnicity are conflated in discussions of educational achievement for Latino students and this naively places the onus of leveling the playing field entirely onto resolving presumed language barriers. Moreover, the centrality of language and ELP classifications in explaining disparities ignores the heterogeneity of ELLs in terms of nationality and migration(s); home language(s) and linguistic experiences; schooling history; and degrees of bi/multilingual competencies. With these nuances in mind, it is valuable to revisit the assessment regime formalized by NCLB.

Concerns about the usefulness of the data provided by high-stakes tests implemented by the states were discussed in the years of voluntary testing preceding NCLB and in the early years of its implementation. This remained a central issue in the legislation's evaluation going forward (Abedi 2002; Durán 2008; Kopriva 2008; Solano-Flores 2008; Solórzano 2008). These works highlight numerous reliability and validity issues with large-scale assessments, including the development and norming of tests that ignores: (1) the cognitive developmental differences between bilingual and monolingual children, (2) the linguistic characteristics of test items, and (3) the lack of sociocultural relevance of tests normed without ELLs in mind. The government also carried out its own inquiries into the impact of NCLB on ELL students, beginning with a report filed by the Government Accountability Office (GAO 2006). Additionally, a congressional hearing before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education took place in March 2007 to further investigate matters of teaching practice, teacher preparation and qualification, schools' and districts' familiarity with and ability to implement recommended practices, and the validity and reliability of evaluation methods for the classification of and measurement of achievement among ELLs (Impact of No Child Left Behind on English language learners 2007). Testimony given to Congress, along with the aforementioned GAO report, noted that ELL academic achievement had not improved in accordance with NCLB progress benchmarks in most states, leading to widespread calls for greater flexibility and support from the federal government, as well as efforts to revise existing standards and tests.

Major Contributions

The Shift to Common Core State Standards

The CCSS were developed with the ambition of promoting complex thought across disciplines by encouraging students to engage in more analysis, synthesis, and argumentation, as well as to standardize benchmarks across states. This directly addressed two important critiques of NCLB – the isolation and dilution of skills and content as teachers engaged in "teaching to the test" (Gutiérrez et al. 2002; Taylor et al. 2002), along with the inconsistency in standards that made comparing achievement data difficult. The CCSS, however, do not displace any of the accountability or appropriation provisions of NCLB nor the ESSA. Rather, they are merely a new set of standards intended to replace those that states devised independently at NCLB's outset. While the new standards were not mandated, funding made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Race to the Top grant program was contingent upon states adopting these standards or devising their own similar in scope and aim.

Many changes have taken place around the country as State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) moved to implement the new standards. Two consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), were funded to develop performance assessments designed to measure the knowledge and skills established by CCSS and were implemented for the first time in 2015. Most importantly, states have also had to develop or adopt new standards for *English as a second language* (most frequently referred to as English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards). These state ELP Standards are an essential and defining element of the education of ELLs in the context of the CCSS for the foreseeable future and will dictate exactly how learning English is defined for this population.

Establishing ELP Standards

Given the confusion among states and practitioners about what ELP standards should include in order to correspond to the CCSS and NGSS, in 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers empaneled a committee of scholars and practitioners to draft a guiding document titled *Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards* (CCSSO 2012). The document offers direction to states on the development of ELP standards and emphasizes the need for states to clearly articulate and justify their views on language making a clear coherent conceptualization of language and the language acquisition process. The document also states (p. 6) that while it does not support any specific organization of ELP standards:

> The Framework does require that state ELP standards reflect a principled organizational strategy rooted in theoretical foundation(s) that reflects the variety of ways in which different ELLs progress diversely in their language development, including methodologies for scaling and developing descriptions of language proficiency which have been cited and researched. Justification should also be provided for the number of levels adopted and evidence provided to support how these levels represent distinctions that can reasonably be measured and are based on actual student performance.

It is not clear that states and consortia have been guided by this framework. Some states (e.g., Texas, California, New York) have developed new CCSS-aligned ELP Standards, while other states have adopted the standards produced by two different funded consortia: WIDA's Assessment Services Supporting English Learners through Technology Systems [ASSETS] and CCSSO's English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century [ELPA21). There are many differences between these sets of standards and very dissimilar terms are used in descriptors or performance definitions for establishing the different levels of proficiency. Little justification is provided for the assumed progressions, and limited information is provided about the theoretical foundations that undergird the assumptions made about second language acquisition and development over time.

Defining and Applying "ELL" as a Category

The adoption of CCSS has also raised awareness of inconsistencies in policy and practice related to the definition of English language learners and their identification. Because of its complexity, there have been many interpretations of the federal definition of English language learners as well as the many differences in the operationalization of the definition by states. The problem of interpretation has been pointed out consistently by a number of researchers over a period of several years (Linquanti 2001; Ragan and Lesaux 2006), and, because of the many questions raised by these inconsistencies, a recent National Research Council study (2011) examined the issue. The panel's report also characterized the ESEA definition as complex and as posing significant problems for the allocation of funds to assist states in serving students determined to be *limited English proficient* (LEP). After examining the GAO (2006) study on data sources available for allocation of funds for ELLs, the NRC report further concluded that no less than *three different definitions* were being employed to identify the LEP/ELL population. Importantly, the panel identified *different conceptualizations of academic and social language* measured by current tests as a significant aspect of the broader problem. It also emphasized that, given these different conceptualizations, state English Language Proficiency (ELP) tests: (1) have different performance levels and (2) test different skills, which are described and measured differently. Because of these differences, students classified at one level (e.g., intermediate) by one state might be classified at an entirely different level in another.

Given pressures brought about by the adoption of the new Common Core State Standards, the question of defining the category of English language learners more

precisely has received increasing attention (e.g., Williams 2014). According to Linquanti and Cook (2013), the US Department of Education has required states participating in any of the four federally funded assessment consortia to adopt a common definition of English learner. As researchers (with the support of the Council of Chief State School Officers) work to inform this process, they report (Linquanti and Cook 2013) that finding a common definition is neither simple nor straightforward. The process will involve four different steps: (1) the identification of potential ELLs, (2) the classification of ELLS in terms of their proficiency levels, (3) the establishment of an English language proficiency criterion against which to assess students, and (4) multiple exit criteria procedure for reclassifying students as fluent English proficient. Williams (2014) contends that the current chaos surrounding the exiting of children from language services can only be remedied by actions at the Federal, State, Assessment Consortia, and District levels working in concert to define and deliver what students actually need in order to succeed in school. For that to occur, policies must be standardized and well-defined.

Works in Progress

Supporting an Equity and Opportunity Agenda

The debates about the usefulness of large-scale assessments, setting appropriate standards, and adequately classifying, assessing, and keeping track of ELLs continue. One particularly active collaboration on this front is the Working Group on ELL Policy (http://ellpolicy.org), whose members labor to provide adequate context on the impacts and history of ESEA upon ELLs (Gándara 2015). The group also recommends ways to improve accountability protocols within ESEA through measures such as stabilizing classification protocols such that schools are not penalized for effectively having students reclassify as proficient in English, establishing realistic yet rigorous timelines based in research findings for students to reach acceptable levels of English language proficiency, and setting academic achievement criteria that aligns with students' linguistic proficiencies and language development trajectories (Hopkins et al. 2013).

Problems and Difficulties

Getting Language Right

In the case of students categorized as English language learners, every aspect of the educational system that involves them implicates language. Standards, curriculum, pedagogies, and assessments can potentially contribute to or undermine these students' opportunity to develop their subject-matter knowledge. Consequently, it is of vital importance that researchers and practitioners continue to scrutinize the set of progressions and expectations for the development of English language learning

currently mandated by law. Minimally, state systems designed to meet the needs of ELLs must be examined to determine whether they are informed by the body of knowledge (i.e., the scholarship and the research) that is currently available about what language is and how it works, what needs to be acquired, and how instruction can impact the acquisition process.

Views and understandings of language that are established in ELP standards are critical. If they are to serve the purpose of appropriately supporting and monitoring the growth of English language proficiency in ELLs, they must be constructed to describe the trajectory to be followed by K-12 learners in the learning of English based as accurately as possible. Getting this aspect of language right matters because statements about students' expected development contained in ELP standards will establish for parents, for policy makers, for school administrators, and for practitioners:

- The ways that ELL students are assumed to grow in their use of English over time
- The language abilities expected at different levels of development
- The aspects of language that will need to be measured in determining progress
- The types of support that will be required in order to provide these learners with access to instruction in key subject-matter areas (available exclusively in English)

Unfortunately, there is much debate and disagreement surrounding the process of second language acquisition (for a review of early theories and emerging approaches, see Atkinson 2011). There is currently no theoretical consensus about how second languages are acquired, what elements are acquired in what order, whether they can be sequenced and taught, and what needs to be acquired in order for students to use a second language to learn subject-matter content. Educators and members of the public also disagree about what is commonly referred to as *language proficiency*.

The first challenge in establishing state ELL policy and practice systems that can support an equity and opportunity agenda is agreeing on an informed conceptualization of language. Conceptualizations of language are notions and broad ideas about language as well as definitions of language that are informed by the study of or exposure to established bodies of knowledge, by facts about existing and developing theories in applied or theoretical linguistics, by research data on the teaching and learning of second languages, and/or by personal experiences with language and language instruction (Seedhouse et al. 2010).

A second challenge in the development of ELP mandated standards involves establishing an organizational strategy rooted in the knowledge base and scholarship from the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for describing students' developing language proficiencies that includes both a conceptualization of language and an accompanying theory of how language (as conceptualized) is acquired. Obtaining consensus on these issues is difficult, however, because, like many other scholarly fields, SLA is characterized by debates, new perspectives and reexaminations of established views that raise questions about established language-teaching

pedagogies and their underlying theories. For example, within recent years there has been an increasing shift in SLA away from a predominant view of second language (L2) learning/acquisition as an individual, cognitive process that takes place in the mind of individual learners to a view of L2 acquisition as a social process that takes place in interactions between learners and speakers of the target language to be acquired. (Firth and Wagner (1997) is viewed by many as the seminal publication in this turn). Currently, there is increasing agreement on the following points. Second language acquisition is a highly variable and individual process. It is not linear. Ultimate attainment for most L2 learners does not result in monolingual-like language even when the L2 is acquired by very young children (Ortega 2009).

Importantly, for those charged with developing ELP standards documents as well as constructing progressions and stages of language development, existing scholarship reflects much concern about the lack of longitudinal studies in SLA (e.g., Ortega and Iberri-Shea 2005). Researchers working from the tradition of corpus linguistics, for example, argue for authentic collections of learner language as the primary data and the most reliable information about learner's evolving systems. Hasko (2013), drawing from the study of learner corpora, summarizes the state of the field on the "pace and patterns of changes in global and individual developmental trajectories" as follows:

> The amassed body of SLA investigations reveals one fact with absolute clarity: A "typical" L2 developmental profile is an elusive target to portray, as L2 development is not linear or evenly paced and is characterized by complex dynamics of inter- and intralearner variability, fluctuation, plateaus, and breakthroughs. (Hasko 2013, p. 2)

In sum, the state of knowledge about stages of acquisition in L2 learning does not support precise expectations about the sequence of development of English by the group of students whose proficiency must be assessed and determined by the corresponding federally mandated ELP language assessments, and thus, constructing developmental sequences and progressions is very much a minefield. As Larsen-Freeman (1978) argued over 35 years ago, what is needed is an index of development that can serve as a developmental yardstick by which researchers can expediently and reliably gauge a learner's proficiency in a second language broadly conceived.

The third challenge in establishing ELL policies that support equity and opportunity for ELLs is the production of language assessments that correspond to state ELP standards. As pointed out above, ELP Standards establish a conceptualization of language (i.e., what it is that students must acquire). They also describe the order and sequence of the acquisition process so that ELP assessments can then evaluate how well students have learned (or acquired) specific elements, functions, skills, or other aspects of language described in the standards. Assessment is essential for compliance with existing legal mandates.

Assessing language proficiency, however, is a complicated endeavor. As Fulcher and Davidson (2007, p. 2) contend, the practice of language testing "makes an

assumption that knowledge, skills and abilities are stable and can be 'measured' or 'assessed.' It does it in full knowledge that there is error and uncertainty, and wishes to make the extent of the error and uncertainty transparent." Importantly, there has been an increasing concern within the language testing profession about the degree to which that uncertainty is actually made transparent to test users at all levels as well as the general public. Shohamy (2001), for example, has raised a number of important issues about ethics and fairness of language testing with reference to language policy. Attention has been given, in particular, to the impact of high-stakes tests, to the uses of language tests for the management of language-related issues in many national settings, and to the special challenges of standards-based testing (Cumming 2008). Cumming (2008, p. 10.), for example, makes the following very strong statement about the conceptual foundations of language assessments:

> A major dilemma for comprehensive assessments of oracy and literacy are the conceptual foundations on which to base such assessments. On the one hand, each language assessment asserts, at least implicitly, a certain conceptualization of language and of language acquisition by stipulating a normative sequence in which people are expected to gain language proficiency with respect to the content and methods of the test. *On the other hand, there is no universally agreed upon theory of language or of language acquisition nor any systematic means of accounting for the great variation in which people need, use, and acquire oral and literate language abilities*. (Emphasis added)

Cumming argues that, given this dilemma, educational systems nevertheless develop their own sets of standards through a policy-making consensus process generally based on the professional perspectives of educators or on the personal experiences and views of other members of standards-writing committees rather than empirical evidence or SLA theories. Cumming further points out that this approach involves a logical circularity because what learners are expected to learn is defined by the standards, taught or studied in curriculum, and then assessed "in reference to the standards, as a kind of achievement testing." (p. 10)

According to Cumming, then, ELP assessments, as currently constructed, tell us very little about students' proficiency or competency in English broadly conceived. They can only tell us where a student scores with reference to the hypothesized sequence of development on which the state assessment is based. Such scores are useful because given current federal and state regulations, they allow educators to classify and categorize students and, in theory, to provide them with instructional supports appropriate for them while they acquire English. Many would argue that in a world of imperfect systems, states are doing the very best they can.

Language, Opportunity, and Equity

In order to achieve both equity and opportunity for all students, public officials, school administrators, researchers, and educators must begin with a clear

understanding that definitions and categorizations established by federal and state laws, policies, and guidance documents as well as by standards-setting processes arrived at by political consensus may have unintended and serious negative consequences for students. As pointed out above, a recent National Research Council study, *Allocating Federal Funds for State Programs for English Language Learners* (National Research Council 2011), added to our knowledge about these issues. After undertaking the examination of the English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments currently used by the states, the report concluded that:

> For this set of tests, we found evidence that the assessments have been developed according to accepted measurement practices. Each of the testing programs documented its efforts to evaluate the extent to which the test scores are valid for the purpose of measuring students' language proficiency in English. The tests are all standards-based. They all measure *some operationalized conceptualization of academic language*, in addition to *social/conversational language*, in *four broad domains* and report scores for each of these domains, as well as a comprehension score and one or more composite scores. They all summarize performance using proficiency or performance levels, and states have established methods of looking at overall and domain scores in order to determine *their respective definitions of English language proficiency*. The tests also have versions available for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, with linkages to enable measurement of growth across adjacent grade bands. These common features provide the foundation for a certain degree of comparability across the tests. (NRC 2011, p. 74. Emphasis added)

As will be noted, the panel identified *different conceptualizations of academic and social language* measured by current tests but focused on the fact that distinguishing between academic and social language was common across the assessments analyzed. It did not problematize or compare these various perspectives, but it did note that the definition of proficiency is determined differently in each state. The panel pointed out, moreover, that tests have different numbers of performance levels, test different skills which are themselves described and measured differently, and that students classified at one level (e.g., intermediate) by one state might be classified at an entirely different level in another. The panel considers several different methods that might be used to establish comparability but concludes by stating that cross-state comparability was not a goal in the development efforts of existing ELP assessments.

Future Directions

There are several key areas to prioritize in the process of improving assessments and the accountability systems they underlie to make them more equitable for ELLs. One is a more consistent and realizable definition of the ELL label itself across states and districts. This requires more uniform protocols to screen students as they enter schools for initial classification, careful attention to avoid misclassification of students into Special Education simply over language issues, and also for their eventual reclassification as proficient in English. In moving toward a common definition of

English language learners (Linquanti and Cook 2013), it is evident that both conceptualizations of language and theories of the ways in which language is acquired matter. If we are to develop a "common performance level descriptor" (PLD) for "English proficient" as advocated by Linquanti and Cook (2013), such a descriptor cannot be based on a political consensus that results in contradictory or incompatible conceptualizations of language or on descriptions and progressions of language acquisition that are not informed by the currently shifting knowledge about the process of acquisition in the field of SLA. In order to develop a common performance level descriptor, we must engage in the task of defining the ways that proficiency can be conceived from various theoretical perspectives. We must weigh the alternatives, argue about contradictory positions, and consider the pedagogical implications of these alternatives. To be sure, the process of defining and conceptualizing language in the light of academic debates about both language and second language acquisitions will be complex, time-consuming, and expensive, but it can and must be engaged.

Further, ongoing work on improving the schooling experiences and outcomes of ELL students must further attend to the heterogeneity in the ELL population rather than be contented with oversimplified "language barrier" explanations for disparities as is often the case among practitioners and policymakers now. In this vein, the emergent scholarship on language as a social practice and evolving repertoire of skills and features must add to its thorough and valuable qualitative descriptions of learning and meaning-making in classroom interactions some evidence of systemic improvement if these principles are to translate into common pedagogical practice. Getting language right for such purposes is an enormous challenge. The stakes, however, have never been higher. The United States cannot afford to provide a second-class education to its growing number of English language learners (Gándara & Orfield 2012), whether as part of the current educational reform movement or as part of a plan for the future of the nation.

This chapter was submitted for review prior to the authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act. Nevertheless, many of the stated challenges persist. ESSA and subsequent regulations call for states to create statewide, uniform objective criteria for classifying, evaluating, and measuring progress of ELL students toward proficiency within a state-determined time frame. States must also account for student characteristics such as initial English proficiency when determining English proficiency targets. Most notably, ESSA moves accountability for ELL progress into Title I (from Title III under NCLB), which is the primary lever of school accountability attached to a much larger pool of federal funds. These changes help draw attention to the education of ELL students, recognize their heterogeneity, and standardize criteria for classification into and redesignation from EL status. However, concerns remain regarding variability across states; quality of instruction, assessment, and curriculum for EL classified students; and the setting of appropriate targets to determine proficiency informed by the latest research on bilingualism and bilingual language development.

Cross-References

- ▶ The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)
- ▶ Utilizing Accommodations in Assessment
- ▶ Washback, Impact, and Consequences Revisited

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