

Essay

Assessing English Language Learners in K-12 Schools

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Who are English Language Learners (ELLs)?

Today's K-12 classrooms are more diverse than ever as a result of the unprecedented rates of migration and globalization. Large student populations in urban schools are new immigrants or children living in multi-generation immigrant families. Some may be raised in families or communities in which they primarily speak languages other than English. Some students may be from refugee families. They may have had limited access to schooling due to a crisis in their home countries. Some may be international or visa students who live away from their parents and pay fees to attend schools. Aboriginal children may speak indigenous languages at home. Regardless of their countries of birth, a large number of students in Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools in urban cities are learning an additional language or multiple languages.

Given ever-increasing diversity in student populations, labels, such as ESL (i.e., English as a Second Language), have become too simplistic to represent language learners with diverse backgrounds. As a result, various terms are used to refer to language learners, such as limited English proficiency (LEP), English as an additional language (EAL), or English language learner (ELL). The term English literacy development (ELD) is used in some jurisdictions to refer to students who have underdeveloped literacy skills in any language due to limited or interrupted schooling. For these students, the instructional language used in school is not the language in which they feel most comfortable and competent. These learners must catch up to a *moving target* (Coelho, 2003), because they must develop social and academic language proficiency to meet language demands in schoolwork, while simultaneously learning academic content. Supporting these students' language learning needs has become a

pedagogical necessity for all teachers, not just ESL teachers.

How Do ELLs Develop English Language Proficiency?

A common misconception about ELLs' language development is that they develop the target language proficiency at a fairly even rate among oral, reading, and writing skills. Research shows non-uniform language development across multiple modalities (Jang, Dunlop, Wagner, Kim, & Gu, 2013), supporting current theories of language proficiency that characterize L2 development in terms of multiple components of linguistic knowledge and functional skills (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Cummins, 1979, 1983). This multi-componential view of L2 proficiency makes sense particularly when we consider the fact that school-aged language learners go through rapid emotional, physical, and cognitive development. This perspective encourages teachers to pay attention to students' strengths and areas for improvement in specific components and tailor their instruction to students' different needs.

In school, students develop conversational and academic language proficiency through informal and formal interactions (Bailey, 2007; Gibbons, 2006). Social communication skills allow students to use the language for interactions with others in familiar contexts (Cummins, 1981). For example, students use social language skills when talking to friends about personal and familiar topics related to daily routine, personal experience, and interests.

In addition to these social aspects of language, students need to develop academic language proficiency, the formal register of language used in the curriculum-learning context (Bailey & Butler, 2003; Cummins & Man Yee-Fun, 2007; Jang, in press). Specifically, academic language proficiency is defined as "the specialized vocabulary, grammar, discourse/textual, and functional skills associated with academic instruction and mastery of academic material and tasks" (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 47). Students with academic language proficiency can apply grammar, vocabulary, and discourse knowledge and skills to meet language demands required to perform on academic tasks in content areas (Amstrom, 2010; Bailey & Butler, 2003; McKay, 2006). Bailey (2007) notes that social and academic language can be differentiated based on the context of its use. In other words, what distinguishes social from academic language proficiency is the difference in the situation as well as the demands of learning materials that students encounter in that specific situation.

Among various components of academic language proficiency, vocabulary, grammar, discourse knowledge, and the functional skills specifically are conceptualized as key skills that students need in order to achieve mastery of language and curriculum content. School-aged students develop vocabulary capacity by increasing the size of their vocabulary and later deepening their knowledge of vocabulary (Schoonen & Verhallen, 2008). They begin to expand the size of their vocabulary by recognizing the most frequent words found in spoken and written text (Coxhead, 2006). Students continue to expand their knowledge by learning academic vocabulary and, later on, specialized vocabulary specific to content areas in secondary school (Stevens, Butler, & Castellon-Wellington, 2000).

Students' vocabulary development is closely associated with the development of grammatical knowledge; in particular, the knowledge of morphology and syntax (Jang, in press). Students use the knowledge of morphology in understanding words' structure, such as the roots of words and the use of prefixes and suffixes. As they acquire the knowledge of syntax, they understand the rules governing how words are put together to make sentences. Gradually, students identify and use the grammatical features associated with specific text genres. They begin to identify different sentence structures while dealing with increasingly dense text and abstract vocabulary and conventions used in different text genres.

As students progress to higher grades, they develop knowledge of discourse, that is, the features of academic texts and discourse patterns. They learn to use discourse knowledge to understand the structure of spoken and written text and participate in academic discourse in a socio-linguistically appropriate and effective manner. With this discourse knowledge, students pay attention to appropriateness in conveying meanings in a specific situation.

While ELLs develop and expand their social and academic language skills in grammar, vocabulary, and discourse knowledge, they must also learn to use language to fulfill various communicative purposes. Language functions refer to the purposes of language use in specific academic contexts. Because research shows that each subject area represents a distinct discourse community (Anstrom, 1997), it is critical to identify the language functions specific to particular subjects for assessing and supporting language learners' academic language proficiency (Christie, 2012; Schleppegrell &

O'Hallaron, 2011). For example, students should learn how to use language to ask questions, form and test hypotheses, make predictions, and draw conclusions based on empirical evidence in order to participate in discussions in a science class. Teachers need practical knowledge about language functions specific to the subjects that they teach. They could then provide explicit instruction on linguistic features and vocabulary used in particular subjects.

What is the Role of Assessment in Promoting ELLs' Language Development?

Effective teachers do not view assessment as an add-on to their teaching, but consider it as an integral component of their teaching. Through various assessments, they gather information systematically in order to understand individual students' unique learning potential as well as areas in which they need improvement. They use assessment information to design and refine instructional activities and strengthen their professional bases to communicate about their students with parents and colleagues in and outside of school. They understand that a *one size fits all* approach is not desirable because students with different learning styles should be provided with the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do in a meaningful way.

Teachers use formative assessment to provide feedback at various stages of the learning process. Many language teachers use a variety of different tasks for a formative purpose to provide ongoing support for student learning (Black, 1998). In addition, they use summative assessment to evaluate what the learner has achieved at a particular instructional time (typically at the end of the school year). Teachers are also expected to provide summative judgments about what students have attained over a specific instructional term.

There is an increasing need for careful examination of how assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning (Nichols, Meyer, & Burling, 2009). Through various assessment activities, teachers should consistently make interpretations about their students' level of achievement and language proficiency and use information from assessment to guide teaching and learning. An on-going feedback loop is key to integrating assessment with teaching. Teachers can use this feedback loop to signal a gap in performance between students' current and desired levels of proficiency. Helping students identify this gap can motivate them to make more focused efforts to reaching

their learning goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). As a result, students understand where they are in relation to their learning goals and are motivated to stay focused on tasks.

You may notice that despite the popularity of the terms *formative* and *summative assessments*, they are not clearly distinguishable in classroom contexts. Summative assessment at the end of an instructional term may actually be used for determining learning goals for the next term and for planning instruction to help students to meet those goals (Jang & Wagner, 2013). Distinguishing formative from summative assessment based on the instructional cycle and frequency of assessment is not useful for many teachers (Bennett, 2011). Any assessment in classroom contexts should provide information about what learners can and cannot do and inform educators about how to support their future learning.

How are Standards-based Assessments Used for ELLs and Their Teachers?

In assessing ELLs' academic language proficiency and curricular achievement, teachers need to make judgements based on curricular standards. Standards-based assessments are increasingly used to track the academic progress of all students, regardless of their backgrounds, with reference to common benchmarks of achievement. Standards are a set of benchmarks of curricular goals specified for students to achieve. In general, there are two components in standards: content standards which articulate what students should know in a particular subject domain and performance standards which describe how well students should be doing.

These standards, working in tandem, are used to specify the knowledge and skills that students are expected to achieve and a range of proficiency levels each of which is elaborated by exemplars. In standards-based assessment, teachers evaluate students' performance on tasks against a set of standards that include distinguishable descriptors of student performance, indicating a range of proficiency levels. These proficiency-level descriptors (PLDs) are widely used in writing rubrics or teacher observation checklists. In the classroom, teachers frequently use the PLDs to evaluate students' essays, role-plays, or oral presentations.

Standards-based language assessment has become widely applied to K-12 classrooms as well as higher education in many parts of the world, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Llosa, 2011). There

has been a demonstrated need for these standards to be more specific to the characteristics of language learning (McKay, 2000). Teachers are provided with standards developed specifically for language learners, such as the ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 students (TESOL, 1997) in order to assess students' language proficiency in content classrooms. It is important that classroom teachers use language standards based on materials that recognize language learners' unique and positive learning paths. If the standards are developed based on learning trajectories of native language speakers only, assessment based on such standards will contribute to a deficit view of language learners (Neugebauer, 2008).

In Ontario, teachers in public schools use a new ELL assessment framework, Steps to English Proficiency (STEP), to assess, track, and support ELLs' language-proficiency development. Developed in collaboration with ESL content experts and teachers, the STEP assessment framework is based on the principles that assessment should be fully integrated into teaching and learning; ELLs should be assessed with reference to grade-specific curricular expectations; and assessment should be developmentally appropriate for how ELLs acquire English language proficiency in schools.

The STEP framework consists of three sets of English proficiency descriptor scales, each comprising six proficiency steps, for Reading and Responding, Writing, and Oral Communication skills for each of four grade clusters (Grades 1-3, 4-6, 7-8, and 9-12). Each continuum includes distinct language behaviours that teachers can observe to evaluate students' current English language proficiency. It also provides subject-specific examples of evidence to illustrate language behaviours and guide future instruction. Iterative field research (Cummins et al., 2009; Jang et al., 2011) took place in collaboration with both ESL and mainstream classroom teachers. Some of the key findings from the field research illustrates that STEP was useful for teachers in advancing their knowledge about ELLs' language development; it served as a common language of reference by facilitating dialogues among teachers; and it provided systematic evidence for teachers' classroom assessment.

Despite such positive evidence supporting the use of STEP for assessing ELLs, a few challenges are worth noting. Unlike other standards or frameworks used in ESL classrooms, STEP is to be used to track ELLs' language development in content classes where they learn subject-specific curriculum. It is possible that too much alignment with

the curriculum makes it difficult to distinguish students' English language proficiency levels with clarity. Considering there is no formal standardized test to be used with the framework, it is pivotal that the framework enables teachers to distinguish students' language proficiency development from their subject knowledge.

Conclusion

Clearly, teachers should know how to assess language proficiency across the curriculum. Unfortunately, many new teachers enter the profession without having had the opportunity to develop professional knowledge about how to assess students, especially students who are learning additional languages or have exceptionalities. Teachers need to take into account students' unique language developmental patterns in both their first and additional languages. Considering the complexity of ELLs' language development and a myriad of factors associated with it, we should be careful when using existing standardized measures. They may not be sensitive enough to assess students' academic language proficiency in content-specific areas beyond social uses of language. It is imperative for all teachers to develop assessment competence in order to enhance the quality of teachers' professional judgments in classroom assessments and provide instructional support for students in language learning needs.

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