Classroom Assessment of ELs in Content Areas: What to Consider and How To Do It? (Part 1)

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For English learners, effective classroom assessment of academic content is an extremely important but complex and large topic. This article will be the first of a multipart series briefly outlining the highpoints of underpinning issues and tips to use when evaluating the academic progress of ELs.[1] Although this series does not address the assessment of ELP, ELs' emergent skills in the development of English will determine how ELs can be assessed best on academic content, particularly when it comes to measuring their higher-order thinking skills effectively. The premise of the articles in the series is that classroom assessment is primarily about informing instruction, actively involving and benefiting both teachers and students through the use of ongoing learning and evaluation processes.

All in all, effective assessment of ELs includes:

- Developing promising instructional activities where inquiry into and exploration of the students' grasp of the content and concepts is embedded in learning;
- Developing effective ways of asking questions using multi-semiotic contexts;
- Designing activities in such a way that students can demonstrate what they know using multi-semiotic representations rather than relying on text;
- Designing activities that allow students to show not only if they 'know the answer' but also, if they get it wrong, where they misunderstand or might be stuck; and
- Analyzing student responses to inform future instruction and/or inform students about what they should focus on, think about differently, or what next steps they might take in interacting with future learning opportunities.

To date, only a fraction of content is taught to ELs by EL specialists. While EL specialists see themselves as primarily responsible for developing ELP, content teachers and schools see them as experts on ALL things EL. More recently, EL specialists have been encouraged to work with content teachers to help the content teachers teach academic English while they teach content. However, EL specialists play a larger role, drawing on a vast repertoire of knowledge and skills that are invaluable for teaching content. These involve (a) knowing how to *hear* the EL students—how to interpret the instruction and what teachers say, what the ELs do in response, and why the ELs act and react as they do and (b) knowing how to *support language* in academic classroom instruction and assessment with other semiotic representations. The good teachers have multi-semiotic classrooms, especially when they are teaching more complex subject matter, but they don't necessarily consider that these types of activities and evaluation opportunities are needed by ELs to access ALL academic content. As such, EL specialists need to work with schools and content teachers over time to show them how to adjust their instructional plans, activities, and assessments to be able to reach, teach, and "read" ELs.

Editor's Notes

The following signs and abbreviations are used in the issue.

—*Success stories* describe a successful project or an instructional approach

— *Resources to Know* provide information regarding PD and teaching foreign languages

EL or ELL—English learners or English-language learners
ELP—English-language proficiency
ESEA—Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESL—English as a Second Language
ESOL—English for Speakers of Other Languages
HS—Head Start
LEA—Local education agency
OELA—Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education
PD—Professional development
SEA—State education agency
USDE—U.S. Department of Education

Citations in the text are in [bracketed numbers]. The reference list follows each article in same numerical order. Other notes are marked by consecutively numbered superscripts.

Underpinnings to Consider when Thinking about Instruction

Beyond academic language, there are several points of context that EL specialists need to remember in order to begin teaching content teachers how to support their ELs in learning content. First, proper

planning is key. Effective classroom assessment is about knowing *specifically* what you want students to learn from each class. We often call this the "target." This specific information covers both the targeted content and the targeted cognitive skills the teacher wants the student to learn. Before beginning a unit, this means:

- Listing what you expect to hear and see while assessment tasks are performed and the targeted concepts are addressed;
- Planning ongoing integration of assessment opportunities into learning activities so the targeted instruction and evaluations can occur effectively and the teacher and students can get a reasonably accurate understanding of where and how the ELs understand the material;
- Evaluating existing commercially developed assessments to use as part of the learning activities; and
- Knowing what prior knowledge students bring to the classroom and to the task.

Assessment tasks should be designed to tell the teacher and the student what the student knows and what problems the student is having and why.

Second, it is important that the content teachers plan to teach and assess ELs in the *full range* of content complexity. Frequently we hear: "Just because an EL doesn't speak much English doesn't mean she is not thinking in complex ways." However, it is easy to fall short both in providing learning opportunities in the classrooms that engage ELs and communicate complex thinking, and in using assessment tasks that provide information about these skills. These learning and evaluation tasks need to involve not just factual learning, but opportunities to identify relationships, compare and contrast, synthesize, generalize, and predict. Content teachers also need to utilize a variety of participatory structures and opportunities to engage in dialogue and self-analysis. All too often content teachers argue that it is "just too hard" to teach and evaluate the more abstract concepts because of the language needed and because they are used to relying on language to teach and assess. EL specialists are in an excellent position to help content teachers broaden their repertoire and teach them how to support language using other modalities, making sure that the integrity of the content's complexity remains intact and is not "dumbed-down," which may happen if content teachers are left to their own devices. EL specialists can help them guard against that.

Third, EL specialists should work with content teachers to plan for diversity. This includes lesson and assessment planning that considers how the students will hear and understand the material. It also includes planning the evaluation activities, and developing the criteria that interpret how student responses are scored so the questions can tap accurately what students know. Considerations include how students' different cultural backgrounds affect how they interpret what is being taught, the experiential knowledge associated with the lessons that the students bring into the classroom, and the tools used for delivering both the instruction and the assessment tasks. They also involve planning the process and participatory structures for classroom interaction so they best match students' diverse socialization backgrounds, liberal use of multi-faceted techniques that touch the range of learning styles, and allowances for various types of student input.

Fourth, it is important for the EL specialist to remember that the depth of teacher knowledge in the subject makes a difference. A content teacher's own expertise and her ability to understand the information being taught has a substantial impact on her ability to communicate with her students effectively and flexibly. When these teachers know the content deeply they can map their expectations backwards and break down the cognitive demand into smaller 'chunks' of information. When the content teachers are not as confident about their content knowledge they tend to depend solely on textbooks or materials without reviewing them critically, which often weakens instruction. The same is true for assessments. Good assessment integrates many 'mini-feedback loops' into instructional tasks. Knowing that English learners, as well as many native English speakers, (a) communicate in varied ways, and (b) that various levels of cognitive complexity are often communicated differently, teachers should use a large repertoire of practices when they assess their students. While good teachers with deep