

**English Learners and Large-Scale Content Tests:  
*Selected Issues for Today and Tomorrow***

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**The Dilemma**

By definition, English learners (ELs) in U.S. schools are learning the language and literacy skills associated with academic content in classrooms while that content is being taught in English. In most content classrooms and nearly all summative assessments, students' knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are primarily taught and assessed through the medium of language, and as content becomes more challenging, the language and discourse structures used to convey it typically become more nuanced and sophisticated. ELs with higher English proficiency have been introduced to the more advanced language structures allowing them at least some access to more complex content in these classrooms. Low- and mid-level English proficient ELs, however, have had minimal exposure to these more sophisticated skills. Does that mean they cannot learn challenging content until they have acquired the English language? Talented teachers have said otherwise (for instance, see del Rosario Bastera, Trumbull & Solano-Flores, 2011). Though these students may not be able to express themselves in a standard manner, if taught properly they are developing cognitive structures to sustain their learning of challenging content.

Learning academic language of content areas is critical for all ELs to succeed in college and challenging careers (see for instance Scarcella, 2003; Faltis, Christian, & Coulter, 2008; Echevarria & Graves, 2006). However, it is also clear that unless ELs are given access to challenging classrooms as they move through school, they are likely to fall behind their grade level peers in learning the full range of content. Absent the continual opportunity to learn more challenging as well as basic coursework, ELs, not surprisingly, become much less likely to be tracked into coursework that include more complex concepts and skills (Office for Civil Rights, 2006) and more likely to drop out (Rumberger, 2006; Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

**Implications for Testing**

While best practice in teaching widely recommends the integration of content and academic language,<sup>2</sup> best practice in testing language development and content alike requires intended KSAs to be measured separately from other information that appears in test questions but is not the intended focus (for instance, see Crocker & Algina, 1986). Test designers developing content assessments in science, for instance, try to use communication vehicles that do not interfere with the integrity of the intended questions or students' abilities to respond. For ELs, communication vehicles used in general testing may need to be supported to ensure access, with the amount and type of support varying somewhat with levels of English proficiency and a few other salient characteristics.

We continue to improve our ability to assess the content knowledge of ELs. To date, approximately 15 relevant post hoc accommodations have been broadly accepted as useful in making general content tests accessible for ELs, particularly ELs with higher English language proficiency (Acosta, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Still problematic, though, are three crucial issues associated with making large-scale content assessments accessible for ELs. These will be briefly considered below.

## 1. Access for lower English proficient ELs.

Some of the ambiguity found in the test accommodations literature is a result of insufficient access options for lower English proficient students. As Kopriva (2008) explains in detail, this is true even with several of the accommodations that have proven to be useful with students with higher English proficiency. Essentially, the challenges involve multiple presentation and response aspects of testing.

- ***inaccessible presentation formats.*** Because lower English proficient ELs have not yet been introduced to more sophisticated language skills, they cannot access more complex test questions where meaning is primarily conveyed through English text. If properly implemented, universally designed (UD) forms that include a combination of simplified English and relevant visuals are helpful, but in general the techniques are effective only for accessing more basic concepts on content tests. Typically, the methods are not sufficient in conveying meaning in more challenging items because the nuance and structure cannot be simplified without losing key aspects of the concepts and skills. Further, post hoc accommodations such as English, bilingual, or picture glossaries are often not terribly useful because they lack the extensiveness needed for this population. For instance, glossaries generally provide a static visual or one or two word text thesaurus for nouns or the root verb, but, as an example, low-English-proficient ELs who are looking for the meaning of "found" may not know to derive that meaning from the infinitive "to find" offered to them in a glossary. Lower English proficient ELs also struggle to access phrases or clauses where understanding each word individually does not give the gestalt meaning of the entire sentence segment. All in all, for this population accessible forms need to incorporate more extensive supports without threatening the integrity or the rigor of what is being measured in complex as well as basic items.
- ***inaccessible response formats.*** Lower English proficient ELs have trouble accessing traditional response formats found in standardized tests. For a number of reasons shorthand multiple choice and constructed response where they need to type in responses are frequently inaccessible. Even if they understand what is being asked, they often cannot communicate what they know because tests do not routinely allow other methods such as demonstration of skills or diagramming relationships. Accessible test forms for this population should include expanded response types on a much broader scale than is necessary for those with adequate literacy. Online testing makes this feasible.

Over the last five years work in linguistics and assessment have investigated how to improve access for this population, and this work has yielded very promising results.<sup>4</sup> While it may (or may not) be too early to decide on definitive access measures for low English proficient ELs today, there should be a principled approach clearly defined that will outline how to build on current work, and a commitment from the assessment field and educators to plan now for how promising findings will be integrated in to the assessment systems in the near future.

## 2. Selection of EL accommodations for online testing.

Almost all of the linguistic accommodations identified by Acosta et al. (2008) and those researched for lower English proficient students as well can be placed on online testing platforms in accordance with APIP technology infrastructure standards. Tests that make available only a small subset of current accommodations, providing individual ELs with no accommodations or an incomplete set of ones they need, put access for ELs seriously at risk and should be reconsidered.

## 3. Proper assignment of accommodations.

At present, ELs with similar needs profiles are not consistently assigned the same accommodations despite research suggesting that the proper assignment of accommodations leads to higher test scores for ELs (e.g. Kopriva et al. 2007). Guidelines to educators have not been sufficient, as repeated attempts at providing more specific criteria by NAEP have demonstrated. As computerized testing moves towards inserting online implementation of these supports,

procedures to ensure systematic assignment should be put into place. No matter how diligent test makers are at identifying sufficient accommodations for all ELs, or making these accommodations available during testing, unless the process for assigning appropriate accommodations for students with specific profiles is improved, access to test content will remain reach of many ELs.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> ELs consistently perform well below grade level in all content areas, as reflected in significant achievement gaps reported in accountability measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Perie, Grigg, & Dion, 2005; NCES, for instance, 2011-2012 NAEP data at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/current.asp#naep2012>). These percentages include large numbers of English learners who are more advanced in their English language development and should be able to handle the complex content with proper accommodations. The pattern holds for state accountability measures and educational attainment for ELs as well. A 2006 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study of state test data found that fewer ELs achieved proficient test scores on content tests than any other subgroup. Course-taking patterns of English learners show that, once they fall behind, they are tracked into remedial coursework to the point that far fewer EL students take advanced coursework in middle and high school in such areas as science and mathematics courses than students who are not English learners (Office for Civil Rights, 2006). In addition, ELs are nearly twice as likely as their native English-speaking peers to drop out of high school (Rumberger, 2006; Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008). Gándara and Rumberger (2009) attributed the higher dropout rate to schools' lack of academic and social supports for ELs beginning well before high school.

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing body of work that argues that academic literacy concepts and skills are learned while students are being taught mathematics, science, and so on, and that, in fact, instructional integration of content and academic language is widely considered best practice (Amaral, Garrison & Klentschy, 2002; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Dale & Cuevas, 1987; Lee, 2002; Stoddart, Pinal, Latzke, & Canaday, 2002; Secada, 1992, 2003). For instance, Bruna and Gomez (2008), and Callahan and Gándara (2004), among others, agree that, for instructional purposes, the integration of related pedagogy, such as the teaching of science content and the teaching of the academic language associated with it, is a viable and well-established teaching method. We certainly have work to do in integrating the roles of ESL specialists and content teachers so that effective content instruction for ELs can be effectively implemented, but that work is beyond the scope of this document.

<sup>3</sup> These accommodations seem to fall into the categories of direct and indirect linguistic supports (Acosta et al, 2008). The current status of the research on these accommodations is somewhat mixed, often because robust studies still need to differentiate focal and control groups by need. However, practitioner reviews tend to confirm these accommodations, properly designed, to be fundamentally viable for ELs with higher levels of English proficiency (for instance, see Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> For example Sireci and Wells (2010) found that oral first language was useful used in conjunction with English forms, it less costly than text translations, and it did not require students to be literate in their first language. Kopriva and others found that using computer capabilities, these students could access fuller glossaries, animation and other techniques could convey meaning in more complex items, and response types could be systematically expanded (see [http://onpar.wceruw.org/for\\_papers](http://onpar.wceruw.org/for_papers)).

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