

## Using state assessments for teaching English language learners

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### ABSTRACT

Populations of minority students the United States have increased steadily over the past few decades to 42 percent of public school enrollment (Echevarria, 2011). English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing population of students enrolled in public schools across the United States. Nationally, if an ELL speaks English with difficulty, 82 percent will not graduate from high school. California alone has 1.5 million ELLs attending public schools. During the 2007-2008 academic year only 11 states met their ELL accountability goals under the No Child Left Behind Act (Zehr, 2011). A recent Texas study reported that 80 percent of ELLs did not graduate from high school (Echevarria, and Short, 2010).

The gap in academic achievement between Caucasian students and those from culturally and linguistically diverse groups has widened primarily because many teachers are under prepared to make content comprehensible for ELLs or teach initial or content-area literacy to a forgotten population of secondary ELLs (Echavarria and Short, 2010). The result is that ELLs enrolled in middle and high schools have become long term ELLs, who's specific learning needs for success in school are largely ignored, thus creating an ELL underachieving group (Olsen, 2010). The question posed in this article remains, What specific skills, knowledge, and strategies do teachers need to know and be able to do to provide ELLs with, (a) systematic language development, (b) academic literacy skills, (c) successful experiences in mainstream classes, (d) the ability to comprehend content standards, and (d) pass standardized assessments in their second language?

Keywords: Language Acquisition, English Learners, California English Language Development Test, English Language Proficiency, Specifically Designed Academic Instruction in English, Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol.

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the fastest growing public school populations are the ELLs who account for 42 percent of the total number of students enrolled in public schools in the United States. Nationally, students from linguistically and diverse groups continue to fall behind Caucasian students in academic achievement in middle and secondary schools, particularly in reading and mathematics (Echevarria, 2008; Echevarria, Vogt and Short, 2008). The reason is that most studies of ELLs have found that many teachers are underprepared to design and adapt lessons and assessments to make academic content comprehensible to ELLs. Additionally, few teachers are prepared by education or training to teach initial literacy or content-area literacy to secondary ELLs in reading, mathematics or science. The result is that schools have continued to create a permanent segregated under class of students who speak a primary language other than English (Echevarria, 2008). By classification, ELLs are not English proficient.

### The Status of Teaching English Learners In The United States

There are relatively few teachers, in the United States, who are prepared with the know how or inclination to spend four to seven years teaching ELLs to reach average English proficiency levels. Many urban school districts are struggling to staff highly qualified teachers under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines. In California, districts continue to lay off teachers in unprecedented numbers in an attempt to balance already tight state and district budgets.

Recently, thirty-two states reported that during the 2004-2006 academic years, mathematics standardized test score gaps between limited English proficient (LEP) and English speaking students increased to 21 percent. The percentage of LEP students failing to score at or above the proficient level for mathematics averaged 74 percent in 2004-2005, and 63 percent in 2005-2006 (Pinkos, 2008).

State and national political rhetoric about teaching ELLs has shifted from general discussions of statements of what constitutes highly qualified and effective teaching to what teachers should know and be able to do to effectively assist ELLs to reach English proficiency. This discussion has escalated during the past few years led by the most intensive development of educational reform policies in American history intended to address issues of teacher quality (White, M. E., Makkonen, R., and Stewart, K. B. (2009).

National panel reports on the status of teacher credential programs recommend performance standards for teacher credential programs including program standards for teaching ELLs. A landmark study by Ferguson in 1991, supplied data that supported the notion that teacher's experience-as measured by scores on a licensing examination, master's degrees, and experience-accounted for about 40 percent of the measured variance in student reading and mathematics in grades 1-11. The Ferguson study asserted that after controlling for economic status, the large disparities in achievement between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by differences in the qualifications of their teachers (Ferguson, 1991).

The idea of connecting that what teachers know and can to positively effects student achievement continues to be fueled by recommendations of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the performance-based standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2009; Hitz, 2008). This paper discusses the urgent need for using data and a new research based teaching protocol for teaching ELLs.

## CONTEXTUAL FACTORS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Walqui (2000) contends that there are several contextual factors that can hinder or support secondary language development considered from the perspective of the language, the learner, and the learning process. Contextual language factors include (a) the linguistic distance between the two languages, (b) students' level of proficiency in the native language, (c) student knowledge of their second language, (d) the dialect of the native language spoken by the students (i.e., whether it is standard or nonstandard), (e) the relative status of the students' language in the community, and (d) prevailing societal attitudes toward the students' native language. Learner contextual factors include whether the learner comes from diverse backgrounds and/or have diverse needs and goals. Second, with adolescent language learners, factors such as peer pressure, the presence of role models, and the level of home support can strongly affect the desire and ability to learn a second language. The learning process is the third contextual factor in second language development. Teachers need to know how to distinguish between students with different learning styles, realize that intrinsic motivation aids learning, and that the quality of classroom interaction may determine student success in second language acquisition. It follows that social and cultural contexts of second language acquisition have a large impact on second language learning, especially for immigrant students. (Walqui, 2003-2004).

### Metacognitive Factors Affecting Second Language Acquisition

Metacognitive factors refer to the combination of various intentional thinking and reflective processes. Metacognitive factors can be grouped into five primary components: (a) preparing and planning for learning, (b) selecting and using learning strategies, (c) monitoring strategy use, (d) orchestrating various strategies, and (e) reflecting and evaluating strategy use and learning. Metacognitive factors translate into teacher modeling strategies in all five areas before, during, and after for lesson design. To support and increase a students' English proficiency, teachers should know individual student level of English comprehension a student has, what students can accomplish within their level of comprehension, and what teachers need to do to assist ELLs comprehension. Learning occurs in context, is active, social, and reflective. (Anderson, N. & Driscoll M. P., CDE, 2011).

### Teaching English Language Learners

Over the past two decades many research findings and reports have focused on the relationship between student achievement and teacher skills. Researchers connect what teachers know and are able to do academically and pedagogically and maintain this connection is crucial to what students learn (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond & Bell 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2008, and Honavar, 2008). Several national projects including the five core propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Teaching Performance Expectations of individual State Departments of Education and the Common Core State Standards Initiative, illustrate that notion that rigorous standards are necessary for the success of ELLs. (National Governors Association, Chief State School Officers and Achieve, 2008, and CTC, 2010).

Through authorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress imposed reporting regulations on all schools and colleges of education through Title II in an attempt to ensure the quality of teacher preparation programs including teaching of ELLs. Using data from the Title II requirements, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report titled, "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality." The data collected from this report suggested that schools of education and district teacher professional

development programs were failing to produce highly qualified effective teachers that the NCLB Act demands. The report continued to question the value students receive from attending schools of education and recommended the implementation of alternative teacher education programs that included streamlining teacher certification through alternative routes (Hitz, 2008).

The responsibility for designing approaches to meet Federal guidelines for teaching ELLs rests with each state. The Council of State School Office (CSSO) recommends beginning teacher performance testing in the areas of common core content knowledge, teaching knowledge, and an assessment of actual teaching similar to the California Teaching Proficiency Assessment (CalTPA, 2010, CSSO, 2008, and CTC, 2010).

The Common Core State Standards continue to remain in discussions of standards based teaching and learning reforms for ELLs. The National Governors Association (NGA), the CCSSO, and Achieve, 2008, support the need for a professional development programs containing new directions for teaching ELLs. (Cochran-Smith and Power, 2010). President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan support overall reform of our education system including rigorous new standards and assessment for students coupled with developing a more talented and effective teaching force to teach ELLs. Both the President and Secretary Duncan also support traditional teacher education programs based on program data (Obama, 2009). This is especially significant when discussing teaching ELLs.

The Status of English Learners In Public Schools In The United States

In a study of 41 states, 17 percent of ELLs scored above the state-established norm for reading comprehension (Kindler, 2001). While 10 percent of students who spoke English at home failed to complete high school, the percentage was three times as high (31%) for language-minority students who spoke English and five times as high (51%) for students who spoke English with difficulty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

School districts or district consortia receiving federal-money, reported that 59 percent of ELLs achieved their goals including satisfying objectives for progress in English, attainment of fluency in English, and demonstration of proficiency on state tests in reading, math and science. California ELLs score 29 percent English proficient (Echevarria, 2008, CDE, 2010, Pinkos, 2008; Zehr, 2010a). Both studies verified previous findings that many middle and secondary teachers are underprepared to make content comprehensible for ELLs (Echevarria, 2008). To close the achievement gap of ELLs, classroom teachers need additional training to incorporate both language and content objectives into their lessons to promote academic literacy. However, and most importantly, they need instructional supports based on reliable data that can assist classroom teachers to begin to reduce the achievement gap between ELLs and native English-speaking students.

Laura Olsen discusses the plight of ELLs in the public school system:

“Now, new research sheds light on what happens to English learners over the years they spend in school and identifies a large group of Long Term English Learners (LTELs) – students who enroll in the primary grades and ELLs and arrive in secondary schools seven or more years later without the English skills needed for academic success and having accumulated major academic deficits along the way” (Olsen, 2010, p 30).

Quality of staffing is a continuing variable as teachers assigned to teach LEP classes remains a political issue that is frequently resolved through teacher seniority. Sheltered English courses taught using methods to make content accessible to English language learners, as viewed

by many school districts and teachers as a desirable solution for teaching ELLs, but requires the resources of trained teachers and linguistically appropriate materials lacking in most schools. Few schools have trained teacher or appropriate materials for this task. The result is that many ELLs do not receive the academic language instruction, or classroom teachers skilled in academic content of subject pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

#### The Plight of English Language Learners in California

Survey data from a study by *Californians Together* found that English-learners in California are largely ignored. Fifty nine percent of English-language learners in middle and secondary schools attending schools for more than six years fail to reach fluent level of English proficiency. Survey data also revealed that California middle and secondary school students classified, as non-fluent English learners are frequently not placed in an English-language developmental program nor receive school curricula and materials designed for ELLs. When they do receive help, it has been inconsistent and fragmented (Zehr, 2010a).

Every California classroom teacher soon realizes that the complexity of students' learning a new language and context requires more than English as a Second Language (ESL) support. Attention to learning English and academic content needs to be the focus in every subject area throughout the day (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2008).

During the past two decades Structured English Immersion (SEI) has been the most popular model for teaching ELLs. Structured English Immersion is the most popular model for a variety of reasons. First, laws passed in Arizona, California and Massachusetts through voter initiatives now requires SEI instruction at the cost of restricting bilingual education. Second, most state student performance assessments are conducted in English with schools or districts that miss targets facing increased scrutiny with possible state sanctions. Third, a large number of ELLs reach an intermediate level of English competence after a few years and then stop making progress. This means that they can participate in conversational English but lag in their ability to apply the rules, structures and specialized vocabularies of English necessary for grade level coursework. Consequently, these students continue to score well below English proficient on state tests in English language arts, mathematics and science (Clark, 2009)

#### Applying State Assessments In The Classroom

In California, to begin the process teaching and assessing ELLs using state assessments, data is collected to support a new instructional and assessment protocol. All newly enrolled California students, in grades K-12, whose primary language is not English, must take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) within 30 calendar days after they initially enroll in a California public school. The statewide-administered CEDLT test classifies ELLs English proficiency by using five language acquisition descriptors and matching teaching strategies to the five language acquisition descriptors. California English Language Development Test descriptors include beginning, early immediate, intermediate, early advanced and advanced. The descriptors also suggest key teaching pedagogy for middle and secondary teachers. To view a more detailed description of CELDT descriptors and grade level performance indicators go to California Department of Education website(CDE, 2011).

Based on the results of the CEDLT, ELLs are placed in one of the following programs: (1) 48 percent of ELLs are placed in structured English immersion, (2) 33 percent in mainstream classes, (3) three percent are placed in mainstream classes by parent request, and (4) 11% are placed in alternative programs and other programs. Structured English Immersion (English Language mainstream classes where instruction is “overwhelmingly in English.” Mainstreamed English language learners are offered English Language Development (ELD) and other related

and appropriate educational services. Such services include the use of Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies, support in their primary language, and some instruction in their primary language. Students who score in the beginning to intermediate levels on the CELDT are generally assigned to Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs. This program emphasizes English language acquisition with appropriate ELD strategies applied on an individual basis. Structured English Immersion programs typically employ Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies for content instruction and primary language support as needed. Alternative programs such as Dual Language or Two-way Immersion are offered if a school has twenty or more students in a grade level who are EL. These programs use ELD strategies and must be made available to all students who are identified as ELLs.

### **Using State Assessments To Drive Instruction**

Sheltered instruction has long been regarded as a logical set of strategies and activities that middle and secondary teachers can use to assist students to master intermediate or higher proficiency necessary to access grade-level subject matter (Aha!, 2007). In California and other states using sheltered instruction, there persists a learning gap in academic achievement between Caucasian students and those from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. To decrease this learning gap a new systematic research-based protocol is needed for teaching ELLs that is data based (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2008).

The Sheltered Instructional Operational Protocol is currently used in all 50 states, and in a number of countries around the world. The SIOP model provides a systematic approach for making content accessible and consistently focuses on academic language development. It incorporates many features recommended for high quality instruction for all student including cooperative learning, reading comprehension strategies, emphasis on the writing process, and differentiated instruction. Specifically, the SIOP contains 30 distinct instructional features grouped into eight components essential for making content comprehensible for ELs. The eight SIOP components are lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, lesson strategies, student-teacher interaction, student practice and application, lesson delivery and review and assessment (Echevarria, 2008; Echeverria & Short, 2010). The SIOP protocol is useful for teachers as an observational rating instrument, a lesson and planning delivery system, a research tool for measuring level of implementation and fidelity, lesson plan and delivery, and as a model for comprehensive district professional development institutes and workshops (Echevarria, 2008). Using the eight components of the SIOP framework, Echevarria and Short (2010) developed a five step Likert-type scale of measuring student progress for each of the eight SIOP components (Echevarria & Short, 2010). The key assessment features include assessment of reading and writing ability, graphic support and bolded key words, and text elaboration and simplification that meet assessment design recommendations for ELs. All items vary in range in levels of difficulty and include short and extended frequent written student responses. Using the SIOP supports building knowledge of content language necessary to answer test questions (Echevarria and Short, 2010).

In 2010, The California Department of Education published a new research-based guide for teaching ELLs. The publication is a research-based state guide for teaching ELLs titled, *Improving education of English learners: Research-based approaches*. This publication details the SIOP model in detail.

Additionally, California is currently in the process of offering a new teaching credential designed for teachers looking to provide English language development (ELD) at the secondary level. The new ELL credential would aim to prepare teachers to teach special ELD classes and provide research-based site and district professional development for teachers of ELLs (Zehr, 2010b). The rationale for this new credential is that while regular English/language arts classes typically teach student about literature, ELD classes commonly help students to understand different kinds of language used in various content areas while supporting English literacy development. When implemented, the new credential will be unique in preparing teachers of ELLs in the United States (Zehr, 2010b).

#### Using State Assessment Data To Design Teacher Generated Assessments for English Language Learners

Teachers of ELLs need to consider several factors when making decisions regarding classroom-testing accommodations for ELLs. These factors are not considered guidelines but rather provide useful context for assessing ELLs and include language factors, educational background, varying degrees of formal schooling in English, varying degrees of exposure to standardized testing, and varying degrees of acculturation to the U. S. school system. The planning process for assessment development in classrooms with ELLs should include several criterion to insure validity. Assessment validity includes: 1) clarity of the test purpose so that valid interpretations may be made on the basis of test scores, 2) a precise and clear definition of the construct the test is intended to measure, 3) defining the test content and explaining how content will be assessed, 4) reviewing state content standards and other documents that provide performance standards and other expectations for student achievement, 5) designing assessments that will allow multiple opportunities and ways for ELLs to demonstrate what they know, 6) develop a careful rationale for weighting individual test items so as not to provide a disadvantage to ELLs by assigning greater weight to long answers written in English, 7) acknowledging that designing assessment and response forms with large amounts of text make is less likely that ELLs will experience assessment success, and 8) the assessment agency designing the assessment should supply information about the cultural backgrounds of its test taking populations, including ELLs. (Pitoniak, M.J., John W. Young, Martiniello, M, King, Buteux, A, and Ginsburgh 2009)

## CONCLUSION

The underachievement of ELLs on both state and national level assessments underscores the need for teachers to rely on more than theoretical models of assessments or best practice, or implement a few strategies for second language learners. English language learners, for the most part, are a forgotten population of non-proficient English proficient students making up more than 30 percent of school populations. Teachers need a flexible model of systematic assessment combined with teaching protocols upon which to adapt lesson design to assist ELLs to develop academic literacy skills needed for success in mainstream classes, for meeting content standards and for passing standardized assessments in their second language. Few people would disagree that English language proficiency is necessary for academic success in U.S. schools. The Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol implemented in states with high populations of ELLs can form the basis for assisting students to reach intermediate levels of English proficiency but whose writing still lags behind grade level standards. This paper supports the use of the CELDT as a database for gathering information regarding a student's English comprehension.

This author maintains that when teachers implement the CELDT data by incorporating key strategies of the SIOP, for each level of English language acquisition, they will aid ELLs to become English proficient. This author maintains that using CELDT language acquisition data and SIOP instructional protocol, new and experienced teachers can make a significant contribution in assisting ELLs to achieve intermediate and advanced levels of English language acquisition.

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