

Adelita Gonzales Baker
EDCI 6460
UNT
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Dr. Mary Harris

ESL Program Exit

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported that in 2010 the number of ELLs in Texas public schools has risen to about one in every six students. With that in mind, it is highly crucial for the state to stay abreast of the latest research trends in second language learning. However, there are questions raised with the current assessment practices in use for English Language Learners. Are current language proficiency assessments accurately measuring these students' abilities? In addition, how does monitoring occur once students exit an ESL program?

Vocabulary Terms

- ELL - English Language Learner, also known as LEP
- ESL - English as a Second Language
- ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages
- Exit - non-LEP student, mainstreamed into a regular classroom
- LEP - Limited English Proficient, the NCLB law defines this as one who
 1. is 3-21 years of age
 2. is enrolled in an elementary or secondary school
 3. was not born in the United States or whose native language is not English
 4. whose level of English proficiency may deny him or her the ability to reach a proficient achievement level on state tests, to succeed in English-led classrooms, or to participate fully in society
- LPAC - Language Proficient Assessment Committee, made up of one or more professional personnel and the parent of a current LEP student.
- NCLB - *No Child Left Behind*, national educational policy
- PEIMS - Public Education Information Management System, government run database for keeping track of public school reports
- TEA - Texas Education Agency
- TELPAS - Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System assesses ESL students in four areas: listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Descriptive Context

In order to gain an understanding of exit practices, there is a need to address the process of ESL placement. Once a student is selected for ESL testing, he/she is administered a series of state approved tests. The LPAC committee reviews the results to determine placement of an ELL

student. If the committee decides that ESL placement is best for the child, then personnel must notify the parent by sharing the student's level of English proficiency as well as program benefits. Once parental permission and signed documents are obtained, the school can code a student as LEP in the PEIMS system. This allows the LEP student to begin receiving ESL services as designated by the school district. Goals of the program include offering instruction, which will allow the student to proficiently read, write, listen to, and speak the English language. While the curriculum may vary to meet each student's individual needs, the program seeks to emphasize the mastery of English language arts as well as math, science, and social studies.

A student's progress with second language acquisition in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are measured annually through TAKS testing as well as TELPAS and district assessments. Under state laws, ELLs may be exempt from TAKS testing for a maximum of three years, with two additional years for ELLs identified as unschooled asylees or refugees. The Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System assesses ESL students in four areas: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The TELPAS reading assessment is an on-line multiple choice test that uses a holistic rating process along with classroom observations. The ESL teacher determines ELL's level of proficiency with regard to listening and speaking by observing how the student interacts with the teacher and other students and how well they understand English through how well they carry out instructional tasks and cooperative learning activities. To assess an ELL's writing, TELPAS raters observe a collection of the ESL student's writing samples from a variety of different content areas. These collections assist in gauging a student's English proficiency level in writing.

For exit from an ESL program, a student must meet specific requirements. First, the student must exhibit satisfactory performance on the TAKS test. Second, the student must exhibit a high level of English language proficiency measured through the reading assessment instrument approved by TEA. Third, the student must take a TEA-approved criterion-referenced written test combined with that of the ESL teacher's evaluation. (As a side note, state regulations do not permit exit level test exemptions. Newly arrived immigrant ELLs are, however, eligible for a 12-month postponement of exit level testing as long as they have the opportunity to test at least once before their scheduled graduation date.) See chart below (TEA, Bilingual Education, 2011).

2010–11 English Proficiency Exit Criteria Chart			
At the end of the school year, a district may transfer (exit, reclassify, transition) a LEP student out of a bilingual education or special language program for the first time or a subsequent time if the student is able to participate equally in a regular all-English instructional program as determined by satisfactory performance in all three assessment areas below and the results of a subjective teacher evaluation. ***			
	9th	10th	11th
Current Oral = Listening & Speaking	Scored Fluent on English OLPT*	Scored Fluent on English OLPT*	Scored Fluent on English OLPT*
English Reading and ELA	English, Reading TAKS, TAKS (Accommodated)**	English ELA TAKS, TAKS (Accommodated)**	English ELA TAKS, TAKS (Accommodated)**
Writing	Agency Approved Writing Test*		
Subjective Teacher Evaluation	Assessments, anecdotal notes, portfolios, etc.		
* In the 2010–11 Agency Approved <i>List of Approved Tests for Assessment of Limited English Proficient Students</i> : http://www.tea.state.tx.us/curriculum/biling/leptests.html ** For eligible LEP students receiving special education services *** 19 TAC §89.1225(h)			

Once a student meets the above criteria, an LPAC meeting at the end of the year evaluates and considers reclassification (non-LEP) of the student. If the committee decides to reclassify the student as non-LEP, notifying parents occurs. Once obtaining parental approval, the ESL instructor monitors students for two additional years.

Differing Perspectives

Once LEPs become proficient speakers, writers, listeners, and readers of the English language as defined by each state, the students transition into regular classrooms. Federal regulations (specifically Title III) require students be monitored for two years to observe the maintenance of English skills as well as academic achievement.

At the National Level

The 2004-06, Title III Biennial Report to Congress (Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (2008) released the following information:

- In 2004-05, 28 states including the District of Columbia reported students as monitored in their 1st or 2nd year.

- In 2005-06, 31 states including the District of Columbia reported students as monitored in their 1st or 2nd year.
- In 2004-05, 43 states including the District of Columbia monitored 380,894 students.
- In 2005-06, 44 states including the District of Columbia monitored 439,536 students.
- 11 states could not distinguish the year of monitoring status, year 1 or 2 monitoring.
- Eight states reported there was no system to collect data for cohorts of students.
- Five states suggested this type of data would be collected starting in 2006-07.
- Five states reported they had just begun recording this type of data and could not offer any numbers.
- In 2004-05 and 2005-06, all states that reported on the monitoring status of students touted test scores at proficient or advanced for mathematics or reading or language arts achievement.

At the State Level

While searching various websites for data regarding the monitoring status of LEP students who have exited the program in Texas, I discovered that the AYP (adequate yearly progress) report informs the reader of standardized testing outcomes for monitored students, but the AYP does not differentiate the students by level/year of monitoring. Are we to assume the state of Texas requires a two-year monitoring system but does not provide a full report for public view?

At the Local Level

Keller ISD monitors exited students monthly. The ESL instructor keeps track of the students' academic grades as well as behavioral issues. (Sometimes behavioral issues escalate if a student becomes frustrated with language as a barrier.) If they are unsuccessful on TAKS the following year and have a history of failing, they return to the ESL program. However, after two years of being successful while back in ESL services they are reclassified Non-LEP.

The Issue in Practice

It seems Federal regulations in Title III have given states much liberty in assessing the exit of ESL students (Kim & Herman, 2010). Each state has its own lists of tests to choose from for assessing the four domains: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Title III also allows a great deal of freedom in the monitoring of exited students who no longer receive ESL services but instead the ESL instructor supervises them closely for two additional years.

The choice of language proficiency assessments as documented by researchers seems to be an ongoing issue Wolf, Herman, & Dietel, 2010). Although Abedi (2004) finds many instruments for the assessment of English proficiency of the LEP student unreliable, Esquinca, Yaden, and Rueda (2005) note the Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey is an exception among the many batteries designed to measure proficiency - Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) to be exact. Yet the same authors remind us that the creators of such tests should keep in mind the many culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds LEP students possess. These two

factors make locating the perfect assessment even more difficult. Two separate studies, one by Moya and O'Malley (1994) the other by McLaughlin, Blanchard, and Osanai (1995) operate within the idea of creating a portfolio assessment instead of a series of standardized tests. These portfolios work within a framework of collecting different projects from the student. For example, the ESL teacher may collect various essays or writing assignments from the various disciplines throughout the year. The premise is to observe a baseline of the students' abilities from which one can then surmise progress and improvement.

Another major issue seems to be the pressure to boost scores immediately. This practice implicitly encouraged by the NCLB, demands that districts produce results for all students. States penalize schools if the LEP students fall below these goals. Thus, the push to accelerate test-taking strategies takes over the natural linguistic care of teaching and nurturing which should encourage and motivate a second language learner. Sadly, the impression given is that there is no time for appreciation and recognition of the student's culturally diverse background Center on Education Policy, 2005).

Snapshots of Research

Texas HB 3, Section 1, Chapter 5 raises questions about the accuracy of current assessments. These tests often measure the knowledge of ELLs while providing linguistic accommodations for assessments in the English language. Most instructional practices do not match up with the standardized testing format.

The BICS/CALP theory is one explanation for the incompatibility of instructional practices and standardized testing. Well known for his theory on BICS (basic interpersonal skills) and CALP (cognitive-academic language proficiency), Jim Cummins introduces a very interesting point regarding language proficiency assessment. BICS is the communication one would hear taking place during day-to-day activities. These skills are less cognitively demanding. However, educators may mistake the student's ability to communicate on a social level as being highly proficient. This of course is not true, as the child only possesses the ability to use simple syntax and limited vocabulary in the second language. At the other end of the spectrum is CALP. This proficiency is more cognitively demanding and takes longer for an individual to master. CALP involves the grueling academia of learning a language such as expressing a complex meaning, analyzing, comparing, classifying, synthesizing, and inferring. A common mistake is to place second-language learners into mainstream classrooms when they have a good handle on BICS but are still mastering CALP. Crawford (2004) notes that, "while they may acquire adequate conversational skills in both languages, they never fully develop their cognitive capacities in either" (p. 197). Research shows that when a child gains academically advanced language skills in the native tongue, the child will outperform those who were educated entirely in the second

language beginning at a much earlier age. This emphasizes the need to reexamine and evaluate the format(s) with which schools are measuring language proficiency.

There is yet another factor playing a part in the issue with NCLB, which has left its mark in the ELL community. Differing exit criteria amongst districts is a call for concern. In fact, De Jong (2004) points out that many states and districts do not agree on the exact score for exit from the ESL program. NCLB has expressed a flexibility of assessment upon states. De Jong goes on to argue that, “some states have no guidelines regarding which assessments to use, others either recommend or mandate the use of certain instruments...” (p. 3). Thus, depending on the criteria used to exit, the type of instruction may differ as well if the tests measure mostly oral or literary development. In addition, NCLB has left the curriculum open for interpretation thus allowing districts to align with state criteria. The curriculum must also target the end goal of the grade level. This affects the ELL student if materials used in the ESL classroom are not up to speed with high school mainstream courses. The exited ELL student may not experience immediate success with these classes.

Another area of research considers the use of standardized forms of assessment to measure the language proficiency of an ELL. Abedi (2004) points out that with the LEP population growing yearly, many may want to reconsider the testing format for these students. The cognitive capability sought forth through standardized testing is sometimes difficult for native speakers let alone a non-native English language learner. In addition, often ignored is the language background of ELLs with such testing. Issues may arise during testing as Abedi (2004) mentions that, “a student possessing content knowledge, such as in mathematics, science, or history, is not likely to demonstrate this knowledge effectively if she or he cannot interpret the vocabulary and linguistic structures of the test” (p. 5). Thus, minor changes in assessment formats could greatly alter the performance outcomes for these students.

Related Issues

One related issue is the practice of mainstreaming ELL students before they are cognitively ready. The transition often leaves them searching for assistance that is no longer available. As shown in a previous section of this document, states are failing miserably at the federally mandated monitoring of reclassified ELLs. Among those states are Florida and California. De Jong (2004) observed that a number of ELLs are not keeping up academically with their fluent-English speakers. Test scores for high school students show that in Florida and California former ELLs are scoring 10-20% lower in content areas other than mathematics. Recent studies indicate the numbers have not improved over the years.

Another related issue is the reclassification of former ELLs. The process needs an overhaul. Once mainstreamed into regular classrooms, the myth is that ELLs are highly fluent English

speaking students. They may appear to have enough social language for “regular” education. Some may indeed never need these ESL services again; however, our system fails these students by labeling them “at risk.” Being re-labeling “at risk” qualifies the student for a different set of services that are monitoring by the ESL teacher. Because the student still may lack the academic language to be successful in the classroom, many teachers may assume there is a lack of work ethic and the student may fail on this basis. In reality, the student may still lack the skills to complete assignments and may give up from frustration. Teachers need to be advised about how to work with these “at risk,” former ESL students for achieving a smooth transition.

Summary

Although NCLB created more mandates for states to ramp up their accountability systems in 2001, it has left many noting that the system has failed the students. ELLs are at a higher disadvantage than ever. Increasingly, schools are required to track yearly progress, and standardized testing becomes the most cost-effective way to do so. These assessments do not account for a students’ background or cultural experiences. Abedi (2004) notes there are cognitive demands of linguistic features created when the ELL student struggles with long word phrases, prepositions, and conditional clauses just to name a few. Yet states administer ELLs the same performance assessment tests as their English-speaking counterparts.

Stephen Krashen, well known for his second language acquisition theory, introduced the affective-filter hypothesis, which reminds us there is a need to create ideal conditions for second language acquisition. These include a learner who is motivated, confident, and has a low level of anxiety (Schütz, 2007). If second language learners exhibit low motivation, low self-esteem, and high anxiety, the affective filter increases, inhibiting comprehensible input for second language acquisition. If tests are abnormally measuring the four domains: listening, reading, speaking, and writing every year, then a student might eventually dread these tests adding to his/her affective filter.

Recommendations

With the widening achievement gap between ELLs and native English speakers increasing, researchers have proposed the need to reevaluate the system of assessments and data recording exited ELLs in the nation (Abedi, 2004; Moya & O’Malley, 1994; Gandara & Merino, 1993; De Jong, 2004). NCLB was well intended but has given states and districts too much flexibility in the forms of assessment and program exiting procedures.

Testing formats as well as exiting criterion greatly affect each other and thus both need careful attention. Their redesign is paramount for the success of future ESL programs across the nation. Without proper assessments, the accountability of students and schools is sure to persist.

By delineating existing procedures with precise terminology and less self-interpretive measures, the similarity of program requirements across states and districts will result in greater success of ESL programs. These procedures will allow researchers and administrators to interpret data and results with similar distributions of results across the nation.

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