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Facilitating Greater Test Success for English Language Learners

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In an age of test-based accountability, accurate assessment is paramount. When testing English language learners (ELLs), challenges associated with language, the use of test accommodations, and test/item format can undermine this accuracy. This paper describes these challenges and offers strategies for overcoming them in order to more accurately assess what ELLs know and can do.

In the current educational accountability climate, student assessment is receiving unparalleled attention, both in large-scale and classroom contexts. This testing presents challenges for many struggling students, and particularly for those still learning English. After highlighting some of the complexities associated with testing English language learners (ELLs), this article offers a number of specific strategies for improving testing practice in order to facilitate greater success for ELLs on both standardized and classroom tests

ELL TESTING ISSUES

English language learners' scores on large-scale and classroom achievement tests are often low due to a number of issues beyond the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the test is intended to measure. Matters of language, ineffective use of test accommodations, and unfamiliarity with the test and/or question format may hinder student performance by introducing and/or falling short of eliminating construct-irrelevant variance. That is, these factors may impact test scores in such a way that the scores represent issues beyond the content and/or skills that are the focus of the test.

Low achievement test scores result in dire consequences for students and teachers alike, particularly in an era strongly focused on test-based accountability. These negative results include misunderstandings about the knowledge and skills possessed by ELLs; claims that teachers and schools are ineffective; and feelings of

frustration on the part of educators, their students, and family and community members. These consequences can be ameliorated with strategies outlined below.

Language issues are an obvious concern when testing English language learners. Researchers agree that testing *in* English constitutes the testing *of* English for students who are still acquiring the language (American Educational Research Association [AERA], American Psychological Association [APA], and the National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 1999; Menken, 2000). It is also important to realize that the language used on tests is different from the everyday language that most ELLs quickly learn and even from the academic language used in instructional settings. Published educational literature suggests that this *test language* is a third type of language (in addition to everyday and academic language) that students must acquire in order to be successful on tests (Calkins, Montgomery, & Santman, 1998; Stevens, Butler, & Castellon-Wellington, 2000).

Test accommodations do offer some promise for helping to level the playing field for ELLs, but many commonly-used accommodations are fraught with their own challenges (Abedi, 2002; Bailey & Butler, 2004). Some accommodations, such as extra time, are beneficial to all students, while others may not really help ELLs (e.g., a dictionary in the student's first language if the student is not literate in that language) or may give them an unfair advantage (e.g., monolingual English dictionaries that might provide "extra" information in definitions or in

example sentences that helps students to answer test questions). Translation of tests can also be problematic since some test questions do not translate well and the difficulty of an English test question may not be comparable to that of a translated question. Further, not all ELLs possess academic fluency in their first language, particularly when English is the language of instruction. What is needed is an accommodation that helps ELLs but does not help their native-English-speaking peers, such as “plain-English” test questions. However, this style of test writing has yet to be adopted by most testing companies, so schools must apply accommodations as appropriately as possible.

Unfamiliarity with the test and/or question format is a third issue deserving of attention when testing ELLs. Different cultures have different ways of expressing and evaluating knowledge and skills. While multiple-choice testing is common in the U.S. context, other forms of assessment are more common in other contexts. Students who are unfamiliar with the format of the test itself or the test questions may likely have difficulty in demonstrating what they know and are able to do on such tests.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE TEST SUCCESS FOR ELLS

The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999) are clear in their guidance regarding the development and use of assessment procedures for English language learners: “Standard 9.1: Testing practice should be designed to reduce threats to the reliability and validity of test score inferences that may arise from language differences” (p. 97). The *Standards* further clarify that “language differences are almost always associated with concomitant cultural differences” (p. 91) which, in the context of schooling, could include differences in test and/or item format. The following sections address strategies specific to the areas of language, accommodations, and test/item format that will enable test developers and users to elicit more accurate representations of what ELLs know and can do.

Language

The *Standards* (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999) clearly address the issue of language as a source of construct-irrelevant variance in testing:

Standard 7.7: In testing applications where the level of linguistic or reading ability is not part of the construct of interest, the linguistic or reading demands of the test should be kept to the minimum necessary for the valid assessment of the intended construct. (p. 82).

Abedi and his colleagues have done a great deal of work in the area of linguistic simplification of test items and provide examples of ways to implement this strategy

(e.g., Abedi, Courtney, Mirocha, Leon, & Goldberg, 2005; Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter, & Baker, 2000; Abedi, Lord, & Plummer, 1997). Kopriva (2000) also addresses the notion of “plain language” test development, providing guidance in how to implement this strategy. Those who develop tests for ELLs, whether large-scale or classroom-based, are urged to incorporate these kinds of techniques for reducing language-related construct-irrelevant variance in tests. Specific strategies drawn from the research literature include the following:

- *Use Simple Grammar and Sentence Structures* – Ensure that the language of tests is clear and easily understood. For example, sentences in present tense are likely to be more readily accessible to ELLs than those in other tenses and shorter sentences are easier to digest than longer ones.
- *Use Active Voice Rather than Passive* – Passive voice can be confusing to ELLs because the “doer” of the action is not the subject of the sentence. Where possible, convert such sentences to active voice to improve clarity (e.g., *A science experiment was completed by Juan and Ahmed* becomes *Juan and Ahmed completed a science experiment*).
- *Use common vocabulary wherever possible* – When vocabulary is not being tested, test items can be made more accessible through the use of everyday vocabulary rather than lesson common terms. For instance, use the word *strong* instead of *durable* or *long* rather than *prolonged*.
- *Include visual support* – The use of pictures and graphics can assist ELLs in making sense of test content and questions. The easy availability of clipart makes this a practical option even in classroom settings.

Kopriva (2000) offers additional detailed guidance in ways to develop test items that are “user-friendly” for ELLs.

Test Accommodations

Test accommodations are a means of minimizing difficulties that ELLs face in testing situations that relate specifically to their status as English language learners. Ideally, an accommodation should be one that benefits ELLs but not native speakers of English. (A common example of such a targeted accommodation is that of eyeglasses; they are effective for the student with less-than-perfect vision but would not help students who see well.)

While some researchers advocate teaching ELLs “the appropriate language abilities to be able to take tests without the need of accommodations” (Bailey & Butler,

2004, p. 184), others outline various accommodations that are appropriate for ELLs. Common accommodations include variations in administration, such as extended time or testing in a small-group setting, and in response mode, such as allowing a student to answer orally rather than in writing. (Large-scale standardized tests typically provide a list of acceptable accommodations in their test administration materials.) The following is a list of considerations for using test accommodations:

- *Utilize Accommodations that Do Not Affect What is Being Measured* – For instance, it would be inappropriate to read a reading test aloud to a student if that test is designed to measure the student’s ability to comprehend text that s/he reads silently. In this case, the “accommodation” has a direct affect on what was being assessed such that the student’s scores would not reflect the intended ability. Since the goal of testing is to estimate student knowledge, skills, and/or abilities in specific areas, accommodations that affect what is being measured negatively impact the value of the testing procedure and the resulting scores.
- *For Large-Scale Tests, Use Only Accommodations Approved by the Test Developer* - This recommendation stems from the previous one; some accommodations may impact the construct being measured and the resulting score-based inferences made about student knowledge, skills, and abilities. Particularly in high-stakes testing contexts, the validity of these inferences must be guarded closely. Developers of large-scale tests typically provide guidance regarding accommodations that will not affect the tested construct or the resulting score-based inferences and these must be closely followed in order to preserve the meaningfulness of the scores.
- *Use Accommodations that Are “ELL-Responsive”* – Rivera, Collum, Willner, and Sia (2006), in their large-scale study of state assessment policies, affirm that accommodations for ELLs must address the “linguistic and sociocultural barriers that prevent [ELLs] from accessing the content of the test” (p. 1). They further clarify that “accommodations are intended to minimize the cognitive resources ELLs need to process the language of the test and maximize the cognitive resources available for accessing the content of the test” (p. 6). Their review of literature reveals that the research on accommodations for ELLs is, as yet, inconclusive. However, both the literature on accommodations and the second language acquisition (SLA) literature support the notion of linguistic simplification, as discussed above. In

addition, SLA research reveals that repetition and clarification represent potentially beneficial accommodations. These types of accommodations are currently part of some states’ accommodations policies.

In addition to reviewing the research literature, Rivera, Collum, Willner, and Sia (2006) developed a two-level taxonomy for organizing and analyzing test accommodations for ELLs. This taxonomy divides accommodations into those that offer direct linguistic support (in the native language and English) and those that offer indirect linguistic support to students. Although advocating the use of specific accommodations is beyond the scope of the Rivera et al. study, Kopriva (2000) does present a list of accommodations that have been deemed promising for ELLs (p. 51). Kopriva uses a more common taxonomy in dividing her list into administration and response accommodations. It is encouraging that her recommendations for administration and response accommodations seem largely parallel to the types of accommodations that are included in state policies listed by Rivera et al. (2006, pp. 121-122)¹. In order to focus Kopriva’s list of promising accommodations according to the extent to which they offer linguistic support, they are presented here organized according to Rivera et al.’s (2006) taxonomy:

- Direct Linguistic Support:
 - Primary language assessments
 - Side by side assessments in L1 [first language] and L2 [second language]
 - Use of L1 or L2 dictionaries and glossaries
 - Oral administration of directions in L1 or L2
 - Oral administration of the assessment in L1 or L2
 - Responding without writing
 - Written response in L1
 - Oral response in L1 or L2
- Indirect Linguistic Support:
 - Responding without writing
 - Extended time
 - Additional breaks
 - Modifications to the test setting

¹ While the list presented by Rivera et al. (2006) includes the notion of simplification, Kopriva (2000) does not include this in her list of administration and response accommodations. Instead, she advocates for simplification in a separate chapter of her book, Chapter 4: “Presentation Accommodations: Accessibility in Writing Items.”

- Using computers

Again, the goal of any accommodation for ELLs should be to lessen the cognitive burden of the language of the test in order to allow students to attend to test content (Rivera, Collum, Willner, & Sia, 2006). In speaking to indirect linguistic support accommodations, Rivera et al. clarify that changes to test schedule and environment are commonly allowed because they do not seem to negatively impact score comparability. However, these researchers emphasize that accommodations that provide indirect linguistic support need to be studied further in order to ascertain their effectiveness. Kopriva (2000) echoes this call with regard to adjustments to the testing schedule.

- *Ensure that Test Accommodations are the Same as Those Used in Instruction* – It is inappropriate to make use of accommodations only for tests, particularly those that are high-stakes in nature. Recall that a test is meant to be a representative sample of what students know and can do. Introducing accommodations only at the time of testing may undermine this representativeness if the student is unaccustomed to the accommodation. For example, the use of a dictionary may not assist a student in demonstrating what s/he knows and can do if s/he is unaccustomed to using it and may actually hinder student performance. Another important example is the use of the student’s first language as an accommodation. If the first language is not used for instruction, it is generally not advised to assess students only in that language, though Kopriva (2000) clarifies that side by side tests in the L1 and L2 can work well for students who are taught in English and have literacy skills in both the L1 and L2 (p. 53).
- *Tailor Accommodation Selection to Individual Students* - The accommodations listed above are not necessarily suitable for all ELLs. For instance, literacy in the primary language is a necessary condition for the effective use of several of the aforementioned accommodations. As such, accommodations must be selected based on the specific skills and backgrounds of individual students. Rivera, Collum, Willner, & Sia (2006) report that an individual approach is part of the accommodations policies in many states and recommend its implementation based on student and instructional variables. Such individualization is an essential component of the effective use of accommodations in both classroom and large-scale test settings.
- *Use a Consistent Team Approach in Selecting Accommodations* – Official policy regarding accommodation selection in many states emphasizes the need for multiple perspectives, although some policies lack clarity regarding exactly who is included in the decision-making process, what those individuals’ credentials are, and how decision makers will collaborate in making decisions, according to Rivera, Collum, Willner, & Sia (2006). These researchers call for increased clarity in such policies and it is recommended that schools and/or districts develop a protocol to guide the selection of accommodations for ELLs that aligns with state policy and specifically outlines participants, processes, and accommodations available in decision-making. Developers of such protocols are further advised to remember that the student may be a good source of information regarding what would work well for her/him in a given testing situation.
- *Maintain Records of What Accommodations are Used* – This recommendation applies to both classroom-based and large-scale tests. Although some large-scale tests do not mandate special coding or “flagging” of the answer sheets of accommodated students, the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* call for this in Standard 5.2 (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999, p. 63). Schools should keep records of the use of test accommodations for both classroom and large-scale tests, regardless of the requirements of large-scale test developers, in order to inform the interpretation of test scores.

Test/Question Format and Test-Taking Strategies

Although classroom-based testing is a cornerstone of educational practice, many teachers oppose high-stakes accountability testing of their students for a variety of reasons. However, the facts remain that high-stakes tests do exist and that they have serious consequences for teachers and students alike. Calkins and her colleagues (1998) point out that “if our children’s achievement on standardized tests matters to us or to them, then our children deserve to be acclimated to the genre of standardized tests” (p. 68). Familiarizing students with the format of the test or of test questions is not “cheating;” rather, it is creating the possibility for the test scores to more accurately reflect student abilities. Remember that the goal of achievement testing, whether classroom-based or large-scale, is to gain an understanding of what students know in an entire domain of content by sampling from that domain. If students answer items incorrectly because of confusion about the test or question format, the scores fall

short of indicating to stakeholders what students know and are able to do within that content domain. As such, the value of learning test-taking skills is clear in both classroom and large-scale contexts. In fact, these skills are so important that Burke (2004) refers them as an “academic essential.”

James Popham, a well-known researcher in the field of educational measurement, offers teachers two guidelines for determining the appropriateness of their test preparation efforts:

- “Professional Ethics: No test-preparation practice should violate the ethical norms of the education profession.” (2005, p. 305)
- “Educational Defensibility: No test-preparation practice should increase students’ test scores without simultaneously increasing students’ mastery of the assessment domain tested.” (2005, p. 307).

Popham clarifies that general test-taking practice is perfectly acceptable, as is familiarizing students with a variety of test and question formats. However, he cautions teachers against doing any “test preparation” activities that would raise students’ test scores without raising their overall proficiency in the content domain. (Recall that the aim of testing is to enable stakeholders to infer the student’s overall domain-specific ability based on a sample from a given domain of content.)

Following are a number of test preparation strategies recommended by a variety of researchers that fall within Popham’s definition of professionally ethical and educationally defensible activities and can be applied in both classroom-based and large-scale testing contexts:

- *Match Test/Item Formats with the Desired Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities* – Effectively eliciting different types of knowledge, skills, and abilities requires the use of a variety of test/item formats, particularly when curricula focus on hands-on, authentic learning. Though teachers may be tempted to create tests using only the item formats typically seen in large-scale testing contexts, Popham (2005) urges educators to avoid narrowing the item types used in classroom assessment to only those found on large-scale tests; he asserts that this may result in a narrowing of students’ abilities to use their knowledge and skills and to express what they know and can do. Rather, utilizing a variety of test/item formats may enhance the expansion of students’ knowledge, skills, and abilities within and across content domains. Further, it prepares students to effectively demonstrate what they know and can do in a variety of situations. Both

classroom teachers and large-scale test developers should consider how to best elicit the desired knowledge, skills, and abilities and utilize test/item formats that most effectively achieve that end.

- *Align Testing with Instructional Practice* – This recommendation applies to both classroom teachers and large-scale test developers, as well. Whether tests are classroom-based or large-scale in nature, students are most likely to be able to best demonstrate what they know and can do if the test tasks are familiar to them. Lack of test task familiarity may introduce construct-irrelevant variance similar to that resulting from inappropriate language demands on tests. Both teachers and large-scale test developers are urged to make use of test/item formats that are familiar to students based on their classroom experiences.
- *Teach Students How to Negotiate Different Item/Test Formats* – Teachers can model the test-taking process and discuss student work on various types of tests, resulting in more accurate demonstrations of what student know and can do. Modeling can take the form of teacher “think alouds” in which the teacher takes a test (perhaps using an overhead projector) in front of the students, demonstrating how to negotiate the test. Then the class can talk about the processes that the teacher used, as well as others that the students might recommend. In addition, giving students time to reflect on and share their ideas about how to “attack” various kinds of test questions can prove very helpful.
- *Ensure that Students Know the “Rules of the Testing Game”* – This includes clarifying for students things such as whether it is “OK” to look back at a reading passage while answering the questions, whether there are penalties for guessing, whether it is acceptable to go back to change answers on finished test sections, and whether students can write in their test booklets or use scratch paper.
- *Allow Students to Experience the Testing Conditions* – These conditions include elements such as the time constraints that students will face during the actual test, the seating arrangements (especially if they are different from the usual classroom set-up), and the materials to be used during testing (answer sheets, calculators, etc.). Students may likely need practice in budgeting their time, which could take the form of timed classroom activities throughout the year. In addition, techniques for coping with stressful situations (such as taking a deep breath or stretching) can be brainstormed and used by students. Practice in efficiently filling

in the “bubbles” on large-scale testing answer sheets may also be warranted; test-takers who are tempted to spend an inordinate amount of time “bubbling” in their answers perfectly may well run out of time, resulting in scores that do not truly reflect their ability. Likewise, practice in using other support materials or technology (e.g., rulers, calculators) will assist students in using those tools effectively during testing.

- *Teach Specific Test-Taking Techniques* – These techniques can assist students in demonstrating what they know on both classroom and large-scale achievement tests. They include strategies such as:
 - Surveying the entire test to get an idea of what is included,
 - Reading the questions before reading the passage,
 - Using the “process of elimination,” and
 - Budgeting one’s time.

Conclusion

Testing is often a major challenge for students who are still acquiring English. However, teachers and test developers can implement specific practices so that ELLs are able to focus their energy and their knowledge, skills, and abilities on those things that tests truly intend to measure. Addressing issues related to language, accommodations, and test/item formats in teaching and testing will empower ELLs to demonstrate what they know and can do on both classroom-based and large-scale achievement tests. In this age of test-based accountability, teachers and test developers owe it to all stakeholders in the testing process to ensure that students have every opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do in meaningful ways that result in accurate understandings of their achievement.

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