

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**Guillermo Solano-Flores***University of Colorado, Boulder*

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Guillermo Solano-Flores

University of Colorado, Boulder

The definition of English language learner (ELL) as someone whose first language (L1) is not English and is learning English may not reflect all the characteristics of the linguistic minorities who constitute over nine percent of the U.S. public school enrollment, pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Unlike students learning a foreign language voluntarily through elective courses, English is for ELLs a second language (L2)—though not a foreign language—that they need to develop while they are developing their L1.

ELLs are individuals whose limited English proficiency (EP) limits their access to education. Major issues and concerns related to educating ELLs include: (1) equity (ELLs cannot benefit from instruction as much as other populations do); (2) test validity (test scores may not be accurate measures of their academic achievement if they do not possess certain linguistic competences that, while irrelevant to the construct measured, are needed in test taking); (3) their under-representation in talented and gifted education programs; (4) their over-representation in special education programs; and (5) their historical underperformance in standardized tests.

Since EP tests provide only a partial picture of an individual's complex pattern of linguistic skills, these instruments should be used judiciously to inform instructional (e.g., placement) and testing (e.g., inclusion) decisions for ELLs. Proficiency in a language is context-bound (it is shaped by different situations, topics, and interlocutors), multidimensional (it involves listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and system-based (it involves *both* L1 and L2). In contrast, practices for assessing EP tend to use de-contextualized language tasks, do not address all language dimensions, and rarely pay attention to an individual's L1. As a result,

information about an ELL's communication skills is fragmented, inaccurate, and inconsistent. An additional limitation of EP tests is that often they are developed from English language arts or English as a foreign language standards, which emphasize formal aspects of language (e.g., spelling, pronunciation) over more functional communicative competences (i.e., pragmatic, discourse, and strategic) that are more relevant to a student struggling to learn in a new language.

Since language tests are sensitive to different aspects of language, making decisions on an individual's EP should be based on multiple measures. In practice, however, these decisions are sometimes based on one single test or on questionable criteria for identifying ELLs (e.g. race, last name, or country of origin). EP categories (e.g., "limited," "proficient") are unlikely to address the tremendous heterogeneity of ELL populations due to multiple patterns of language dominance and multiple schooling, demographic, educational, and cultural factors.

While bilingual education programs can support ELLs in their development of their L2, to be effective, they must: (1) promote the development of L2 in addition to—not at the expense of—L1; (2) integrate (rather than segregate) linguistically diverse populations; (3) be based on a view of LP as a difference, not a deficit; and (4) be sensitive to the characteristics of the students' communities. The effectiveness of these programs is shaped, among other factors, by social context and fidelity of implementation.

Assessment policies should be consistent with the notion that, while ELLs develop a conversational fluency in a relatively short time, they need five to seven years to develop English academic language. Valid measures of academic achievement for ELLs cannot be obtained by testing them after a short period of instruction in English. Also, assessment policies based on blanket approaches may be limited due to the heterogeneity of ELL populations; what works for one student may not work for others. Certain testing accommodations (e.g., test completion

extended time, item linguistic simplification, test translation) are effective, though moderately, in reducing the gap score between ELLs and non-ELL students in large-scale tests.

SEE ALSO: Bilingual education. Bilingualism. Culturally competent assessment of English language learners. Language and educational assessment. LP. Limited EP.

Suggested Reading

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Suggested Resources

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)

<http://www.nabe.org/about.html>

NABE is a professional organization devoted to representing both English language learners and bilingual education professionals.

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

<http://www.ccsso.org/>

CCSSO provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues, including the education and assessment of English language learners.

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

<http://www.cal.org/>

CAL is an organization for the promotion and improvement of the teaching and learning of languages and for the research on language issues.

Contributor

Guillermo Solano-Flores, Ph.D.

University of Colorado, Boulder