

Surviving the Test: English Language Learners in Public Schools

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, standardized tests and assessment-based reforms have been widely implemented in the public school system in the United States. The intent of these reforms is to academically challenge all students to meet high standards, including English Language Learners (ELLs), and to ensure that attention and resources are given to these students to help them achieve their full potential. ELLs are students whose first languages are one other than English and are in the process of learning English. They represent about 8% (4.5 million students) of all K-12 students nationally and these numbers are growing rapidly.¹ Since NCLB was passed, all students are required to take standardized tests to evaluate the teachers and schools as to whether they are meeting the needs of all their students, including ELLs. It is crucial that schools are meeting the needs of ELLs because the school system needs to ensure that this growing group of students is receiving the same quality education as the rest of the student body. However, the high-stakes testing imposed by NCLB on ELLs often yield inaccurate results. The creators of reform must make decisions about test-taking that are fair to ELLs and address their needs. With the new emphasis on the inclusion of all students, how ELLs perform on assessments can greatly affect the positive or negative evaluation of a teacher, school, district, or state. This paper will overview the recent trends in legislation of high-stakes testing for ELLs, the negative implications current testing policies have on ELLs, and how these problems can be remedied.

¹ Abedi, Jamal Abedi and Patricia G'andara. "Performance of English Language Learners as a Subgroup in Large-Scale Assessment: Interaction of Research and Policy," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices* (Winter 2006): 36.

Legislation: The Dominant Trend of High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is being used more widely now than ever before. One of the four pillars of NCLB is to provide stronger accountability for results. One of the main goals of NCLB, is that states would work to close the achievement gap and ensure that all students achieve academic proficiency. Each state and school district is required to produce annual report cards that inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools are required to show they have made adequate yearly progress (AYP), which is typically measured through the students' performance on standardized tests. If AYP goals are not met corrective actions will be taken, such as restructuring the schools.² When calculating AYP, NCLB requires that schools include ELLs in that measurement. Facing schools with strict consequences, the policy is designed to direct resources at the most at-risk students, an increasing number of which are ELLs.

When NCLB passed, the hope was that its stress on high standards for all students, combined with requirements that could be enforced for meeting the standards, would lead schools to devote more attention to the academic programs of ELLs. While they have been given more attention, the law does little to address some of the largest barriers to their achievement such as resources inequities, critical shortages of teachers trained to serve ELLs, inadequate instructional materials, substandard school facilities, and poorly designed instructional programs. Meanwhile, the emphasis placed on short-term results narrows the curriculum, encourages excessive amounts of test preparation, undercutting the best practices based on scientific research, demoralizing dedicated educators, and pressuring schools to abandon programs that have proven successful for

² Official Government Website for the No Child Left Behind Act. <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>.

ELLs over the long-term.³ By setting “arbitrary and unrealistic targets for students achievement,” the accountability system in NCLB cannot distinguish between schools that are neglecting ELLs and those that are making improvements. Because the achievement targets are so strict and inflexible, “virtually all schools serving ELLs are destined to be branded as failures.”⁴ NCLB derails efforts toward a general reform, and ultimately the misguided accountability system means no accountability at all.

Another development emerging out of NCLB is that for the first time all states have developed and implemented English language proficiency standards and annually assessed ELLs. For example, in New York ELLs were required to take the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test to test the annual progress of students with limited English proficiency. However, in 2006, the federal Department of Education ruled that this standard could not be used as a substitute for the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment, which, although it complies with NCLB, does not provide accurate results. The state was given an ultimatum: either it corrects this problem or loses \$1.2 million dollars in federal funding.⁵ This is just one example of a situation in which, although NCLB has good intentions, it often becomes an obstacle in serving the needs of ELLs.

Implications for ELLs

Overall Performance Barriers

³ James Crawford. “No Child Left Behind: Misguided Approach to School Accountability for English Language Learners,” paper presented at the Forum on Ideas to Improve the NCLB Accountability Provisions for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners Center on Education Policy. September 14, 2004. http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf.

⁴ Crawford, http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf.

⁵ Luis O. Reyes. “Testimony of Luis O. Reyes” at the New York City Council Education Committee Public Hearing, October 26, 2006. http://www.elladvocates.org/documents/legislation_litigation/Reyes_Menken_Testimony.pdf.

ELLs have historically lagged behind their peers in all content areas, especially in subjects that emphasize the speaking of English. The performance gap has been attributed to a number of factors, including parent education level, poverty, the acquisition of a second language, inequitable schooling conditions, teachers with inadequate credentials, and tests and other measurement tools that are insufficient in assessing their skills and abilities.⁶ Another factor that increases the difficulty of setting reasonable AYP targets is the variability of time it takes children to acquire a second language. Research has shown that students in bilingual and ESL programs require four to seven years to achieve grade-level academic performance in English. Diversity and mobility also complicate the task of determining rates of progress. For example, schools that experiences a sudden increase in the number of poor, ELL children, which is not uncommon, are likely to see a decline in the schools average ELL scores. The same reasoning applies if a group of ELLs move somewhere else the following year – scores are likely to increase. Both of these common situations yield results that are not meaningful about the quality of education offered to ELLs, yet NCLB holds schools accountable for such annual fluctuations.⁷

Testing Policy and the Use of Results Limits Life Chances

High-stakes testing, particularly in English places ELLs at an unfair disadvantage and penalizes them for their lack of English proficiency. The ELLs are kept from opportunities of advancement in school and in their futures. ELLs are more likely to have to repeat a grade, graduate late, or be placed on low-track remedial education programs that do not address their language learning needs.⁸

⁶ Abedi, “Performance of English Language Learners,” 37.

⁷ Crawford, http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf.

⁸ Reyes, “The Testimony of Luis O. Reyes,” http://www.elladvocates.org/documents/legislation_litigation/Reyes_Menken_Testimony.pdf.

Because so much emphasis is placed on testing, the quality of education that ELLs receive decreases. Educators that work with ELLs are found to “teach to the test” because the test scores carry so much weight when it comes to evaluating their performance as teachers or as a school. Teachers focus on test content and test preparation strategies when the ELLs could be learning.⁹ Testing policies not only undermine ESL and bilingual education programs, but also effective teaching strategies, curricula, and practices.

The Tests themselves are Unfair and Invalid

A number of negative implications for ELLs caused by the passage of NCLB are illustrated through the example discussed earlier concerning what happened in New York with the ELA test. The test is not designed to assess ELLs, and is unable to measure what these students really know and are able to do. Any test in English “is first and foremost an English proficiency exam rather than a measure of content knowledge.” Studies suggest that unnecessary linguistic complexity may hinder ELL students, the result being that they are not able to express their knowledge because their English skills are still developing. Educational psychologists, measurement experts, and educators all have raised concern over how ELLs are tested with a tool that was created for native speakers of English. Unnecessary linguistic complexity causes the results of the tests taken by ELLs to be skewed, and therefore they are not fit to be tools of assessment for ELLs.¹⁰

⁹ Reyes, “The Testimony of Luis O. Reyes,”
http://www.elladvocates.org/documents/legislation_litigation/Reyes_Menken_Testimony.pdf.

¹⁰ Reyes, “The Testimony of Luis O. Reyes,”
http://www.elladvocates.org/documents/legislation_litigation/Reyes_Menken_Testimony.pdf.

However, even some of the state tests do not accurately reflect the ELLs ability to successfully navigate a standardized test. There are arguments that standardized tests, such as the ELA mentioned above, should not be used to determine how ready a student is to take an English-only class that requires academic English as opposed to social English. For example, G'andara and Rumberger found that 60% of tenth grade ELLs in 2005 were able to pass California's state test (the CELDT) at early levels of advanced English proficiency or at an advanced proficiency, but only 3% of these students could pass the state's ELA at a proficiency level. Large schools with diverse populations that have their requirements broken into parts, such as by having multiple tests for ELLs, encounter major obstacles in reaching their AYP goal. Schools with a large proportion of minority students are under more pressure, while at the same time problems associated with high-stakes testing disproportionately affect minority students.¹¹

One of the major disadvantages to having ELLs take assessments written in English is that there is a risk they will not understand some of the questions based on the cultural assumptions made in the question. Since culture and cultural content are inextricably woven into language, culture-free testing does not exist. With this known, the task is not to make the tests culture-free, but to make them culturally responsive. These tests should be comprehensible and not contain cultural bias, such as when students are not provided the background information they need in order to complete the problem.

Solutions

Fixing the Tests

¹¹ Abedi, "Performance of English Language Learners," 40.

In order to make testing fair for ELLs and gather more valid results from their tests, accommodations must be made. Accommodations are modifications to the administration of the test which allow ELLs to show what they know when language is not an issue, or at least when the effects of language are minimized.¹² To address the problem of cultural bias in tests, it is important that ELLs can figure out the cultural content of test questions through context. For example, it would be difficult for an Arabic-speaking ELL recently arrived to the United States to figure out the following statement:

“Linda had 3 tamales and 2 tacos before noon.”

However, with two minor changes it becomes clear the “tamales” and “tacos” are referring to food items.

“Linda ate 3 tamales and 2 tacos for lunch.”

Through carefully constructing assessment questions, the problem of cultural bias can be reduced greatly.¹³ Another effective way to make the tests fair and valid is through simplification and reducing linguistic complexity in the wording of the tests. Linguistic complexity refers to a situation where a test question is worded to make the interpretation of what the question is asking more difficult. Levels of complexity are determined by word frequency and familiarity, word length, sentence length, long noun phrases, long question phrases, passive voice constructions, comparative structures, prepositional phrases, sentence and discourse structure, subordinate clauses, relative clauses, concrete versus abstract or impersonal presentations, and negation. All of this comes down to

¹² National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Resources About Accommodations for English Language Learners. Washington, DC: Judith Wilde. Available at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/resabout/accommodations/index.html>. Published February 28, 2007.

¹³ The Education Alliance at Brown University. “Teaching Diverse Learners: High-Stakes Testing.” <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tl/assessment/stndrdassess.shtml>.

simplifying the vocabulary, the syntax of the language, and the complexity of the sentence structure. This accommodation may remove portions of the reading tasks that are clearly not important to understanding the information to be read when answering the questions. It does not change the overall context of the material, nor does it “water down” the material.¹⁴

A series of studies aimed at testing the assessment of ELLs with regard to the language barrier had two major findings. When the linguistic complexity of a test was reduced (or in other words when the language on the test was simplified), ELLs performed significantly better and it reduced the performance gap between ELL and non-ELL students. The study also showed that reducing the linguistic complexity of test items did not alter what was being tested and the validity was not compromised. Other studies have shown that the ELL students had difficulty with test items that were linguistically complex, and that ELLs had a significantly higher number of questions at the end of the test that were not answers or not reached. When the questions were linguistically complex, the student was slowed down and misinterpretation was more likely. It also added to the reader’s “cognitive load” and interfered with other tasks they needed to perform to answer the question.¹⁵

Fixing the Policy

NCLB has put emphasis on high-stakes testing, and as is clear in the sections above, the reliability and validity of the results are often questionable at best and cannot be relied upon to generate meaningful information for measuring the accountability of a school. School accountability should be comprehensive and oriented toward reforming

¹⁴ NCELA, <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/resabout/accommodations/index.html>; Abedi, “Performance of English Language Learners,” 39.

¹⁵ Abedi, “Performance of English Language Learners,” 39.

instruction to reflect what is known about the best practices in the classroom. To that end, the National Association for Bilingual Education recommends a six point plan to more accurately measure school accountability for ELLs. The first point is that until assessments for ELLs have been proven valid and reliable, they should not be used to make high-stakes decisions for students, educators, or schools, and the federal government should increase spending on scientific research in ELL assessment. The second point is that AYP should not be calculated for an ELL subgroup, but instead ELLs should be tracked on a longitudinal basis where English proficiency and high academic standards are accounted for. Additionally, the achievement of ELLs should be measured using multiple indicators, such as grades, graduation and drop-out rates, and alternate forms of assessment, and local authorities should be responsible for deciding on a case-by-case basis whether an ELL is ready to be assessed in English and what accommodations should be given to them.¹⁶

The fourth point is that accountability should concentrate on building a school's capacity to serve ELLs, not on labeling or punishing the school, and sanctions should only be used as a last resort as a response to clear resistance from the school. The next point is that schools should be accountable to everyone involved in them, such as parents and communities, and that these payers should have an active role in the accountability system. The final point is that accountability for serving ELLs should use the *Castañeda* framework to determine:

1. Whether schools are providing well designed instructional programs based on sound theory.

¹⁶ Crawford, http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf.

2. Whether programs are supported with sufficient funding, qualified teachers, appropriate assessment and placement, and adequate materials.
3. Whether programs are evaluated comprehensively for effectiveness.
4. Whether programs are being restructured, when necessary, to ensure that students are acquiring high levels of English proficiency and academic achievement.

The *Castañeda* frame work that was referred to provides a set of tools to determine whether schools are meeting their obligations toward ELLs. To determine this, three standards have to be met by the school. The program must be based on an educational theory recognized as sound by experts; the resources, personnel, and practices must be reasonably calculated to implement the program effectively; and programs must be evaluated and restructured, if necessary, to ensure that language barriers are being overcome. Above all, *Castañeda* emphasizes instructional reform and getting at the causes of underperformance, rather than imposing punitive sanctions for failing to reach arbitrary AYP targets.¹⁷

Conclusion

There have been two major trends in public education concerning ELL students: the increasing number of ELLs in the public schools system, and the increased dependency on standardized tests results as a measure of the progress ELLs are making. Consequently, the fairness and validity of high-stakes testing on this increasing population must be among the top priorities of the national education agenda. NCLB must be re-imagined and amended to better serve the needs of the ELL population in public schools. Until such legislation is adopted, accommodations, such as reducing linguistic complexity and cultural biases, need to be implemented.

¹⁷ Crawford, http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf.

Annotated Bibliography

Abedi, Jamal and Patricia G'andara. "Performance of English Language Learners as a Subgroup in Large-Scale Assessment: Interaction of Research and Policy." In *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices* (Winter 2006): 36-4.

This article gives an overview of the issues involved when ELLs are involved in high-stakes testing. The study identifies factors that affect the performance gap between ELL and non-ELL students.

Coltrane, Bronwyn. "English Language Learners and High-Stakes Test: An Overview of the Issues," on the Center for Applied Linguistics Website. November 2002. Available at <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0207coltrane.html>. (Accessed May 8, 2007).

This website provides a concise overview of the issues involved when high-stakes testing and ELLs are brought together.

Crawford, James. "No Child Left Behind: Misguided Approach to School Accountability for English Language Learners," paper presented at the Forum on Ideas to Improve the NCLB Accountability Provisions for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners Center on Education Policy. September 14, 2004. Available at http://www.nabe.org/documents/policy_legislation/NABE_on_NCLB.pdf. (Accessed May 27, 2007).

This paper discusses why NCLB is actually the detrimental to the progress of ELL students, and how high-stakes testing and the accountability requires put forth by NCLB do more harm than good concerning ELLs. It also offers an alternative plan that it hopes the government will adopt in regards to holding schools accountable for ELLs.

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Resources About Accommodations for English Language Learners. Washington, DC: Judith Wilde. Available at <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/resabout/accommodations/index.html>. Published February 28, 2007. Accessed May 8, 2007.

This website provides an overview of the issues and policies related to making accommodations for English Language Learners. It also lists a number of current resources related to testing, accountability, and accommodations for ELLs. The website also provides a profile for each state concerning ELL-related issues.

Official Government Website for the No Child Left Behind Act. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>. (Accessed May 10, 2007).

This website offers details into the No Child Left Behind Act and features FAQs, and information on testing, reading, accountability, supplemental education, and more.

Reyes, Luis O. "Testimony of Luis O. Reyes" at the New York City Council Education Committee Public Hearing, October 26, 2006. Available at http://www.elladvocates.org/documents/legislation_litigation/Reyes_Menken_Testimony.pdf. (Accessed May 10, 2007).

Reyes testimony provides the negative effects of including ELLs in ELA testing, as NCLB requires. He urges the SED to take steps to modify the New York's test for testing ELLs to comply with federal standards, as dictated by NCLB because he feels it is a better measure of proficiency and accountability than the ELA is.

The Education Alliance at Brown University. "Teaching Diverse Learners: High-Stakes Testing." <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tcl/assessment/stdndrassess.shtml>. (Accessed May 14, 2007).

This website describes how high-stakes testing has become the dominant trend in the United States and why NCLB and AYP have become so important to schools and ELLs. It also discusses various accommodations for testing ELLs, to what degree tests can be culturally responsive, and when and how to assess students to determine if they have a disability.