Success with ELLs

Authentic Assessment for ELLs in the ELA Classroom

The World of Educational Assessments

For many schools, it’s *that time of year* again: the time when teachers, administrators, and students are focused on end-of-year assessments. Similar to the way that retail outlets place Halloween decorations on the shelves before Labor Day, the K–12 education world starts preparing for end-of-year assessments earlier and earlier. My high school–age students were given their state English exam in January of their junior year so that the district could focus on students who failed or received a grade that is considered “too low.” The hope is that through this focus, these students will pass or do better during the June administration of the exam.

Those of us who inhabit the world of education know that we live in an assessment-driven field. The educational landscape is becoming packed with standardized, external assessments, and some states test children every year from kindergarten on. This focus on standardized assessments is a double-edged sword: On the one hand, stakeholders, students, and teachers need to understand how students are doing, what their level of mastery is, and what improvements can be made in terms of programs and instructional services. On the other hand, high-stakes standardized assessments have served to narrow the curriculum (teach to the test) and remove much of the creativity that has been a hallmark of good teaching. We also know that some people are good test takers, and others are not. In a case like this, the assessment results tell us about the test taker’s skills as a test taker rather than anything about their content knowledge and skills. And what if the student gets the right answer for the wrong reason (a guess on a multiple-choice exam) or the wrong answer for the right reason (a question that is subjective or creates a dissonance between a student’s knowledge of the world and what the test manufacturer believes to be the one right answer)?

And what about ELLs? In the past, many states provided exempt status from high-stakes content assessments for ELLs who had been in school in the United States for less than three years and had not yet achieved a determined level of proficiency in English. However, after NCLB, most states exempt ELLs from content assessments for one cycle at most, and ELLs are included in a district’s Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) report. While this has increased accountability in terms of teaching ELLs, content programs are often still developed without proper consideration of the needs of ELLs. This creates a situation where the exams may not be giving accurate information about the performance of ELLs.

Challenges ELLs Face on Standardized Assessments

English language learners face the challenge of simultaneous second-language acquisition and content-knowledge development. Are the results of ELLs’ exams informing us about their content knowledge or English language ability? Are language assessments providing information about the students’ past educational preparation or about their actual language proficiency? Is a wrong answer a result of unfamiliarity with the test format or trouble understanding a word in the directions? Unfamiliar sentence structures or interpretations of specific structures can cause misinterpretation, such as reflexive pronouns or relative clause structures or interpretations that students’ native language does not have. Consider the following sentence as an example:

Someone pushed the mother of the girl, [who] was on the balcony.

Native speakers of English prefer the interpretation where *the girl*
was on the balcony. This is a preference for attaching the relative pronoun [who] to the noun phrase that appears lower in the structure. However, native speakers of Spanish, German, Dutch, French, and Russian have been shown to prefer attaching the relative pronoun [who] to the noun phrase that appears higher in the structure, in this case the mother. Such structural ambiguity is something that most assessments don’t plan for, but the meaning of the sentence is different, depending on with which noun the relative pronoun is co-indexed.

Challenges on assessments can also arise from unfamiliar vocabulary use. If ELLs learned English as a foreign language in their native country before their move to the United States, the variety of English taught can affect usage of particular words; for example, British, American, and Indian Englishes use words differently: the noun dress can refer to cloths for men, women, and children in Indian English; banger means sausage in British English. Within these larger language varieties are dialectal differences that can be class governed, regionally determined (e.g., bubbler means a water fountain in parts of the United States), gender specific, or based on group identity.

Background knowledge and past educational experiences also play a role in how ELLs perform on standardized assessments. For example, on a 2007 New York State Testing Program eighth-grade ELA assessment, the following question prompt appeared:

Read this sentence from the story.

Like pieces of a puzzle, the pattern clicked into place.

The sentence assumes that students have had experiences with jigsaw or other manipulative puzzles, which may not be the case for all ELLs. While for many who grew up in middle-class America, puzzles may seem to be a given part of our shared cultural knowledge, this can be an unfamiliar topic for ELLs. How many of us would be familiar with the popular children’s game Chigora Danda, which is played in Zimbabwe but may have roots in India?

Another example of a question that may determine more about an ELL’s prior experiences than his or her actual knowledge comes from the 2005 New York State Assessment sampler for ESL students (NYSESALT; see http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/osa/nyseslat/samplers.htm). There is a picture showing students in a school band and students in a school industrial arts classroom. The prompt is as follows:

Look at the pictures below. There are different activities you can do at school. Look at the pictures. How are they the same? How are they different? Why would a person like one of these better than the other? Give as many reasons as you can. Write about the pictures on page 15 of your booklet.

The assumptions implicit in this question are that (1) these students go to a school that offers these activities and (2) the ELL has or has had access to these activities. This is more a question of students’ past experiences with particular school-based practices than an accurate assessment of English proficiency; a student with less experience with the pictured activities will be graded lower than a student who has more experience with such activities. Yet these students may have the same language ability.

Standardized assessments are not the only type of assessment that can conflate issues of language proficiency and content knowledge. Traditional classroom assessments may pose many of the same challenges discussed above: they are highly language dependent in ways that may exceed the current proficiency level of the students; they may give an assessment of language proficiency rather than content knowledge; and they may provide cultural connections and contexts that ELLs are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with.

These issues make standardized assessment of ELLs a challenge and the information provided by these assessments unreliable. However, as educators, we do need to know how students are doing, what gains they are making, where gaps in their understanding exist, and what types of instructional strategies and topics need to be introduced to facilitate learning. Assessing ELLs in mainstream English classrooms can be a challenge, but there are ways that English teachers can move toward a more accurate way of learning about their ELLs.
Toward More Authentic Assessment Procedures for ELLs

The most accurate and valid information about all student progress comes from assessments that are designed by teachers and are connected to the actual instruction that is occurring in the classroom. However, a large number of teachers report that they feel that they are unprepared to assess ELLs (Fradd and Lee). This is problematic; as we have discussed in prior columns, the ELL population is a rapidly growing group, and English classrooms without ELLs will be the exception rather than the norm in the coming years.

There are ways that English teachers can assess their language learner students in the classroom that will provide valuable information about what these students know, what their interests and motivations are, what they are capable of doing, and what types of instructional strategies and content must be integrated to ensure that they are “getting it.” To this end, one thing that English teachers can focus on is performance-based measures of ELLs on authentic tasks that offer a variety of ways that ELLs can show they are mastering the content. In recent work on assessment for ELLs, Gottlieb discusses how performance-based assessments can provide teachers with information about both language and content mastery. The key to successful performance-based assessment lies in Gottlieb’s extended metaphor of a bridge that connects classroom activities with real-world activities and language to content. Performance-based assessment gives English teachers a variety of sources from which to obtain information about their ELL students and can provide a complete picture of what these students know, how they interpret the material, and what they are capable of doing. This picture is much richer than traditional assessment measures. According to Lorraine Valdez Pierce, effective and well-developed performance-based assessments accomplish the following:

- use meaningful, naturalistic, context-embedded tasks through hands-on or collaborative activities
- show what students know and can do through a variety of assessment tasks
- support the language and cognitive needs of ELLs
- allow for flexibility in meeting individual needs
- use criterion-referenced assessment for judging student work
- provide feedback to students on strengths and weaknesses
- generate descriptive information that can guide instruction
- provide information for teaching and learning that results in improved student performance

Traditional classroom assessments, like standardized tests, are dependant on language and may provide little to no information on ELLs’ understanding of concepts. ELLs do well when evaluated using a variety of innovative performance-based assessments because there are embedded opportunities for them to show what they know in ways that match their current linguistic development in English. In addition, performance-based assessment includes visible criteria. In other words, teachers share with students the criteria that they will be evaluated on, their expectations for student work, examples of student-generated products that fall into all levels of the grading range, as well as scoring rubrics, checklists (to be sure all necessary elements are included), and questions that ask students to reflect on the project. Asking students to assess their performance through reflective writing or discussion is also an essential element of performance-based assessments. Peer feedback can also be included in the assessment process. When managed well (clear ground rules, specific guidelines), peer feedback can motivate learners and provide extended opportunities for ELLs to engage in discussion using the academic language essential to success in the English classroom, therefore building critical cognitive academic language in an authentic setting. The ELLs’ motivation can be enhanced, their self-confidence increased, and their sense of connection to their mainstream peers developed through well-constructed peer-feedback opportunities.

These explicit terms allow ELLs to make sense of the project, see finished products to use as models, and reflect on their performance on a given assignment, which provides valuable information for teachers. Richard J. Stiggins discusses how such clear statements of expectations on the part of teachers and how sharing all criteria and examples of past student work increase the likelihood of student success.
Authentic Assessment of ELLs in Practice

Perhaps one of the most motivating things English teachers can do for their ELLs is to provide opportunities for them to see the immediate connections between their lives and the curriculum, an important component for success. Authentic activities can include a variety of presentation formats that connect a work of literature, a poem, a quote, a piece of art, or song lyrics to the students’ lives, either their lives in the United States or their past experiences in their native countries. These presentation formats can include traditional tools such as PowerPoint but can be expanded to include a video posted to YouTube, a website, a blog, the creation of a music video, writing and acting out an episode of a favorite show dealing with the themes of the work under investigation, or Web animation. These real-world tasks can also include traditional and electronic letter writing and project-based tasks that are meaningful to students outside the school and in their communities.

These formats not only allow teachers to see what their ELLs know in ways that go beyond traditional assessments, they also allow ELLs to develop the necessary and current technological skills needed for success in their new society.

Assessment of ELLs in mainstream English classrooms, like planning for instruction, requires additional time and collaboration on the part of teachers, but the benefits that students and teachers reap from such work are numerous: Teachers gain accurate and nuanced understandings of their ELLs’ understanding, interest, and abilities. ELLs gain valuable information about themselves as learners and their understanding of concepts under investigation becomes deeper and lasting since it is connected to their skills, interests, abilities, and lives outside the classroom. In addition, their confidence and language abilities are greatly enhanced. Mainstream students benefit from a variety of assessment measures as well, and these form a differentiated assessment protocol that enriches all students’ experiences and interest in the curriculum. Finally, the community that is formed in the classroom through the completion of collaborative projects, peer feedback, and increased, authentic interaction is valuable for all involved.

In a recent article in The Reading Teacher, researchers discuss ways that mainstream teachers can assess ELLs and include the following suggestions:

- Involve students in performance assessment tasks.
- Offer students opportunities to show and practice knowledge in nonlanguage-dependent ways through Venn diagrams, charts, drawings, mind maps, or PowerPoint slides.
- Promote participation in non-threatening situations that encourage experimentation with the target language of study. Assess language learning in the participation activities. (Lenski et al. 29)

When English teachers include performance-based, nontraditional assessments for ELLs as a supplement to the traditional assessments, a clearer picture of the ELLs emerges and allows English teachers to develop learning experiences that meet their diverse needs. In addition, ELLs are more likely to develop real knowledge surrounding the topics under investigation in the English classroom through the use of authentic assessments. This has a recursive effect: their increased knowledge and confidence will enhance their performance on the necessary traditional assessments. It is a win-win situation for all involved.

Works Cited


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Students today are asked to read and interpret an increasingly diverse variety of nonfiction texts. From science textbooks and standardized tests to the daily newspaper, students are constantly required to determine what is "real" and are asked to make judgments about validity, objectivity, and bias. Because nonfiction texts are read differently than fiction, students need to learn different skills for decoding and interpreting nonfiction works.

In this follow-up to his successful Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom, John Golden offers strategies for teaching nonfiction by demonstrating that teaching students to "read" documentary films can help them identify and practice the skills that good readers need when they encounter other nonfiction texts.

By tapping into students' natural attraction to film, teachers can help students understand key concepts such as theme, tone, and point of view as well as practice and improve their persuasive, narrative, and expository writing abilities. Studying documentaries helps students learn how nonfiction texts are constructed and how these texts may shape the viewer's/reader's opinion.

With classroom-tested activities, ready-to-copy handouts, and extensive lists of resources, including a glossary of film terminology, an index of documentaries by category, and an annotated list of additional resources, John Golden discusses more than thirty films and gives teachers the tools they need to effectively teach nonfiction texts using popular documentaries such as Hoop Dreams, Spellbound, and Super Size Me, as well as lesser known but accessible films such as Girlhood, The Gleaners and I, and The True Meaning of Pictures.


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