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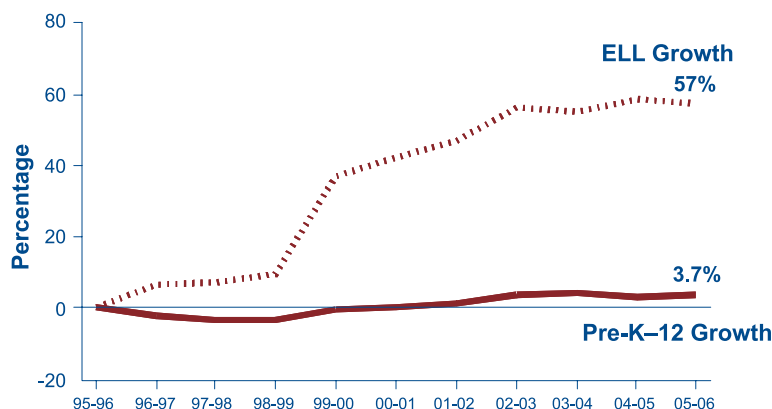
Addressing Achievement Gaps: The Language Acquisition and Educational Achievement of English-Language Learners

English-language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student population in U.S. public schools. Since the 1995–1996 school year, ELL enrollment has grown 57 percent, compared with less than 4 percent for all students. In addition to this growth in numbers has been a heightened focus on this population among policymakers. Federal policy set forth in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires each state to identify and be accountable for the instruction and performance of ELLs on measures of English-language acquisition as well as in academic subjects. As a result, states, districts, and individual schools are searching for tools and strategies to support the education and knowledge attainment of their ELL population.

The statistics are staggering:

- In 2004–2005, approximately 5.1 million students, or 10.5 percent of the U.S. student population, were ELLs.
- Approximately 79 percent of ELLs nationally are from Spanish-language backgrounds.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE GROWTH IN TOTAL PRE-K TO GRADE 12 ENROLLMENT COMPARED WITH GROWTH IN ELL ENROLLMENT SINCE 1995/96 – 2005/06



Source: NCELA, *The Growing Numbers of Limited English Proficient Students, 1995/96 – 2005/06*, Fact Sheet. http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/stats/2_nation.htm.

THIS ISSUE

The Language Acquisition and Educational Achievement of English-Language Learners: Highlights from an Achievement Gap Symposium Co-Sponsored by ETS and the National Council of La Raza

The eighth “ETS Addressing Achievement Gaps Symposium” provided a public forum for educators, policymakers, and researchers to forge productive relationships that will advance their efforts to enhance the educational achievement of this country’s five million English-language learners (ELLs). The conference was held at ETS’s world headquarters in Princeton, N.J., Jan. 15–16, 2008.

The symposium featured leading experts who have devoted years to studying, writing, and advocating for the diverse population of ELL students. The conference attracted more than 300 participants, including teachers, administrators, teacher educators, researchers, and policy analysts from across the country. This issue of *ETS Policy Notes* offers an overview of the issues, research, and insights highlighted at the conference.

More information about the conference, including presentations, is available at www.ets.org/achievementgap08.



- While ELLs reside throughout the United States, they are heavily concentrated in six states: Arizona, California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. These six states contain 61 percent of the nation’s ELL population. The U.S. commonwealth of Puerto Rico accounts for another 1 percent.
- Other states, including Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee, experienced ELL growth rates of 300 percent and higher growth between 1995 and 2005.
- California educates one-third of all the nation’s ELL students — 1.6 million students.
- 85 percent of all ELLs in California speak Spanish.¹

Perhaps most astonishing is that the majority of ELLs, in both elementary and secondary schools, were born in the United States.

To shed light on not only the challenges but also the opportunities these evolving demographics present our nation’s schools, ETS and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) co-convened a two-day symposium focused exclusively on advancing the educational achievement of ELLs in the United States and closing ELL achievement gaps.

ETS is deeply concerned about such issues of expanding access to quality education. As **Michael T. Nettles**, Senior Vice President of ETS’s Policy Evaluation and Research Center, told conference participants: “For all of our success, we need to hear the ideas and engage in ongoing dialog with people like you who are also working to advance education and the quality of life for people in America.”

An Issue of Civil Rights

“We’re no longer talking about dealing with a minority part of our population,” ETS President and CEO **Kurt Landgraf** declared in his opening remarks. “We are in fact talking about the part of the population that is very quickly becoming the majority part of our K–12 student cohort.

“We need to find new ways to reach these populations. That is not only socially conscious but, frankly, in the best interest of the United States both economically and in terms of equity in education. Because if we don’t do this, leaving 25 percent of our student population behind in terms of education and opportunity has only one outcome — disaster for this country.”

Landgraf noted that hosting events such as ETS’s achievement gaps symposia is an important component of the company’s social mission of advancing quality and equity in education for all people worldwide. In sponsoring the conference, Landgraf said, ETS and the NCLR hoped to:

- advance knowledge and understanding of English-language learning in the United States
- create a network of resources for symposium participants to draw on in the future
- illuminate what we’re learning from current research on ELL issues

“We recognize that information is core to decision making,” Landgraf said, noting that the goal of this symposium was to listen, learn, and engage in active discussion about how to most effectively address the learning needs of ELLs. “We must address what to do with a growing population of people who do not speak English as their mother tongue. It’s a matter of morality, a matter of ethics and, frankly, a matter of pure economics.”

¹Rose M. Payán and Michael T. Nettles, *Current State of English-Language Learners in the U.S. K–12 Student Population*, 2007, Educational Testing Service, http://www.ets.org/Media/Conferences_and_Events/pdf/ELLSymposium/ELL_factsheet.pdf.

20 Years of Change ... But Not Enough

Picking up on Landgraf’s message, **Delia Pompa**, Vice President of Education for the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), noted the fortuitous timing of this conference, given the politically charged climate surrounding U.S. immigration policy as well as the pending reauthorization of NCLB.

NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. For more than two decades, it has made education one of its highest priorities, working to address the achievement gaps between Latino students and their non-Latino peers. In her position at NCLR, Pompa oversees programs ranging from early childhood education and pre-kindergarten to NCLR’s Early College High Schools and charter schools.

Pompa thanked President Landgraf for his vision which has led ETS along this direction. “That same spark, that same belief in student achievement that began ETS 60 years ago is what brings us here today to look at how we can close a different achievement gap ... than the one we were concerned about 60 years ago, but one that may be even more important given where we are today,” Pompa said.

Looking back over the past 20 years, Pompa told the audience that what amazes her today is how many of the issues characterizing achievement gaps have changed — and how many have remained the same. “It is amazing that today in 2008, we’re hearing some of the same questions and they haven’t all been answered,” Pompa stated.

Pompa added that the issues surrounding the instruction of ELLs are relevant today as Congress

considers reauthorizing NCLB — 20 years after the 1988 reauthorization of the Equal Education Opportunity Act.

“Twenty years ago, the fight was to make sure bilingual education didn’t get killed and that services for ELL and immigrant students stayed alive,” she recalled. “We were concerned about evaluation and the achievement gap, but in a very different sense — we thought of English-language learners as those Title VII students separate and apart from everything else that took place in the federal legislation.”

Today, she said, “ELLs are at the table. They are a part of all federal legislation. And what we fight about is not whether there’s going to be education for ELLs, but how we’re going to include them in assessment, how we’re going to include them in adequate yearly progress.”

Pompa noted that this evolution has been a positive one for U.S. education and ELLs. She warned, however, that we must not lose sight of NCLB and the good that it has done for the ELL community as we move toward the political battles that will likely accompany the forthcoming NCLB reauthorization debate.

‘We at NCLR believe that NCLB is the civil rights legislation for minority and English-language learners of today ...’ — Delia Pompa

Sessions I and II: English-Language Learners Today

Challenges and Opportunities

The hard work of the symposium began by focusing on the current state of affairs for ELLs, starting with **Kenji Hakuta’s** presentation, “English-Language Learners in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives: Challenges and Opportunities.”

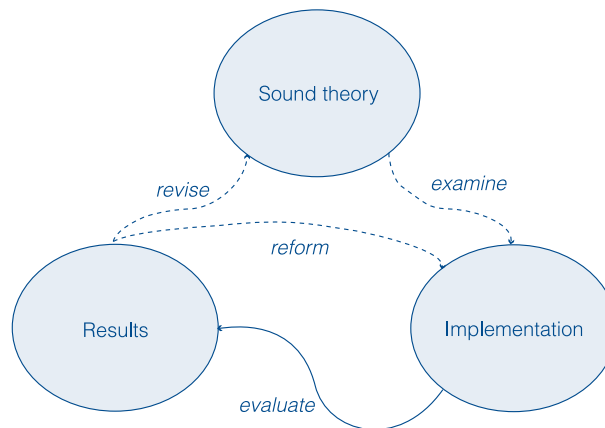
Hakuta, a Professor of Education at Stanford University's School of Education, provided a concise overview of the bilingual debate. He recalled that the *Brown v. Board of Education* equivalent for ELLs is *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), in which the Supreme Court unanimously found that the lack of linguistically appropriate accommodations — in this case, educational services in Chinese — effectively denied Chinese students who were not fluent in English equal opportunities on the basis of their ethnicity. This landmark decision expanded the rights of ELLs throughout the country.

According to Hakuta, one important interpretation of *Lau v. Nichols* came through the Texas courts in *Castañeda v. Pickard*, a seminal decision that established a three-part test to assess the adequacy of a school district's program for ELL students. The criteria were:

1. The program must be based on an educational theory recognized as sound by experts in the field or that is considered by experts as a legitimate experimental strategy.
2. The program must be implemented with adequate resources and personnel.
3. The district must evaluate the program to determine whether it is achieving results and make appropriate adjustments, where needed, to ensure that language barriers are actually being overcome.

"The *Castañeda* criteria provide a framework around which we can bring together research, policy implementation, and outcomes, and the linkage between them," Hakuta said.

Castañeda Standards



He went on to highlight four perspectives surrounding the field of English-language learning, all of which are often influenced by political rhetoric. First among these, he said, is what is commonly referred to as “the bilingual debate.”

“Anytime there’s something that, on the face of it, is seen as un-American — such as using any language other than English in the schools — it becomes a point of political contention. The bilingual debate is clearly in play and has defined many of the early Title VII battles in Congress and many of the battles that have been played out in states.”

Hakuta argued that more important than debating whether bilingual education is or is not better than instruction in English is to spend time trying to understand how best to close the achievement gaps between ELL students and those who are native English-language speakers.

“It’s somewhat disheartening that we’re still debating things like how long does it take for kids to learn English,” he said. Hakuta noted that other important areas of research include aspects of how to improve reading comprehension as well as areas of neuroscience as it relates to English-language learning.

Changing Demographics

Calling attention to why the research findings discussed at the conference are so important, **Jeanne Batalova**, Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, began her discussion of demographic trends by stating, “Many kids are bright and smart, but may lack the English skills they need to shine academically.”

Batalova highlighted five demographic trends that have influenced the implementation and success of NCLB with children of immigrants and ELL students. These trends include:

- rising immigration flows, of both documented and undocumented individuals
- greater geographic dispersal of immigrant and ELL populations
- increasing concentration of ELL students in few U.S. schools
- rising numbers of native-born ELL students

According to Batalova’s research, every year about 1.5 million immigrants come to the United States. Children of immigrants account for 23 percent of all children in the United States and almost a third of low-income children. This latter finding “has powerful implications for NCLB and other policies that attempt to address economic disadvantages,” Batalova noted.

Furthermore, 4.6 million children in our nation’s schools have at least one parent who is undocumented, representing more than a quarter of all children of immigrants. Two-thirds of these children (3 million) are U.S. citizens, and about 2 million of these children are undocumented themselves.

Batalova also discussed the relatively recent movement of immigrants and their children to

states and communities other than those in which immigrants historically have settled. Since 1990, Batalova said, “new destinations” states have experienced unprecedented growth (more than 200 percent, compared with an average national growth of about 90 percent) in immigrant populations. These states include Nebraska, North Carolina, Indiana, and Alabama.

She said that what makes this trend significant with respect to ELLs is that “the immigrant population in these states tends to be younger, more recently arrived, poorer, less educated, more likely to lack English-language skills, and more likely to be undocumented.”

Another startling finding is the shifting of ELL and overall K–12 student populations that were shown in Figure 1. California, a traditional immigration state, accounts for about one-third of all ELL students nationwide. Over the past decade, however, California’s share of ELL student enrollment has increased 25 percent while its total student enrollment increased only 5 percent.

At the same time, Batalova noted, North Carolina — a quintessential new-growth state — experienced 370 percent growth in its ELL student population, while growth in the state’s total K–12 student population was essentially flat.

Perhaps the most surprising of Batalova’s findings is that three-fourths of all elementary school ELLs and more than half of secondary school ELLs are natives who were born and educated here and, one would presume, were not very well served by the education system.

‘Most ELL students are not immigrants but children born to immigrant or native U.S. parents.’ — Jeanne Batalova

These demographic trends are more than a matter of interest, and they point to the challenges confronting our nation’s education system. Batalova concluded her presentation by pointing out that “schools are facing the educational challenges of meeting the distinct linguistic and educational needs of long-term ELL students as well as those of recently arrived immigrant children, many of whom enter with substantial educational gaps.”

Session III: ELL and Early Literacy Development

This session examined the importance of preschool education on literacy development of ELLs. **Eugene Garcia**, Vice President for Education Partnerships in the Office of Education Partnerships at Arizona State University, gave an overview of trends in the Hispanic preschool population in the United States.

Drawing on the work of the National Task Force in Early Education for Hispanics, Garcia focused his presentation on this country’s Hispanic population, particularly its youngest members. He also presented findings on achievement gaps among Hispanic ELL students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

At the outset, Garcia noted some revealing demographics. For example, there has been a 400 percent increase in the country’s Latino population since the 1960s. With respect to our nation’s youngest citizens, 24 percent of U.S. babies born in 2005 were Hispanic, a 53 percent increase since 1990. Moreover, about 90 percent of Hispanic children in the United States, up to age 8, were born here.

“Essentially, at this age level, you’re working with U.S. citizens,” he explained. Garcia also noted

that the broad label of “Hispanic” or “Latino” can mask subtle but important differences between these groups.

Moving into analyses of academic trajectories based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K), Garcia focused on the math and reading performance levels of Hispanic ELL students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Summarizing the details of his presentation, Garcia said that “the gist of this presentation is that achievement gaps form early; they ... to some degree are dealt with in mathematics, but not in literacy in the kindergarten through fifth-grade levels, but we’ve got a long way to go to decrease those achievement gaps.”

Ellen Frede, Associate Professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at The College of New Jersey and co-Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, delved into the policies and practices that help close ELL achievement gaps.

‘Preschool is a good remedy, period. It’s not just a good remedy for English-language learners. It’s not just a good remedy for Hispanic students. It’s not just a good remedy for low-SES students. It’s a good investment for all children.’ — Ellen Frede

Frede highlighted some of the known benefits of preschool and English-language learning, specifically:

- Attendance in high-quality preschool improves outcomes for Hispanic children, as it does for all children.
- Dual-language practices enhance these outcomes in both English and Spanish.
- Specific policies and practices can ensure better outcomes for children.

Frede also emphasized the importance of understanding that young children have to work hard to develop a second language. “It’s a myth to say this is the time when they just learn languages like sponges,” she said. She added that while it’s true that second-language acquisition comes most easily during early childhood, “it’s not true to say that it’s easy for young children to learn a second language. There are costs to learning a second language, but there are great benefits in doing it. It’s hard work.”

She further noted that it’s important to understand that young ELLs can easily lose their first language, and that having a strong home-language base can facilitate learning English and serve as a predictor of later achievement.

“The stronger their home language is, the better they’re able to do later, even in English,” she said, adding that evidence indicates that bilingual children have higher IQs and do better in school.

Frede went on to say that she has found that techniques commonly used with older children are unlikely to be effective with three- and four-year-olds. For example, she said, “pulling out preschoolers for specific ESL instruction doesn’t make sense when the main thing you’re teaching in preschool is language.”

Concluding her comments, Frede said that, “all children should leave school bilingual,” and she provided a summary of the policies and practices that have been shown to facilitate bilingual acquisition.

Session IV: ELL Achievement Gaps at the Elementary and Secondary School Levels

ELLs are among the lowest-scoring groups in both national and state assessments. The fourth session of the conference examined the ELL achievement

gap trends of recent years. **Margarita Perera Pinkos**, Assistant Deputy Secretary and Director of the Office of English Language Acquisition for the U.S. Department of Education, examined these gaps, reported by the states, while **Mary Pitoniak**, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Associate Project Director for Statistical Analysis and Psychometric Research at ETS, reviewed the gaps using NAEP.

Are Our Children Learning?

In her presentation, “Status of Title III Implementation: Challenges, Opportunities, and Implications for the Future,” Margarita Perera Pinkos discussed gap trends at the state level, drawing on findings from the Consolidated State Performance Report.

Pinkos began by providing background information regarding population trends among Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students and the academic achievement performance levels of these students in reading and math.

After discussing these trends in some detail, she pointed out that demographics are secondary to the real issue at hand: “The real question is: Are our children learning?”

Pinkos then provided insight into the challenges of implementing Title III accountability and addressing the continuing problem of access to quality education. At the core, she said, the challenge is diversity: the diversity of the ELL student population, differing levels of need, the unequal distribution of resources, differences in the availability of interventions, and variations in accountability systems.

Yet, she said, despite all these differences, it’s essential that our nation’s education system set the same rigorous curriculum and standards for all students. The point, she concluded, is that all students deserve a good education.

'I think that when you take away access to a quality education, you steal from that child a future, you steal from a country the ability to survive, you steal from a family its dreams.'

— *Margarita Perera Pinkos*

What the Tests Show

So are ELL children learning? Pitoniak, of ETS, discussed what assessment results reveal. Drawing on data from NAEP, she compared achievement gains of ELL students, former ELL students, and non-ELL students in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math for 2005 and 2007.

According to Pitoniak, before 1996 in math and 1998 in reading, NAEP didn't offer accommodations. As a result, some students were excluded from taking the test.

Since allowing accommodations, NAEP has developed decision-making guidelines to help educators determine which students should and can have accommodations, and what those accommodations can be.

However, even with the availability of accommodations, there are still students who are excluded from taking the assessment. For this reason, it's important to be clear about exactly which students were assessed, she said. She also noted that "while the effect of exclusion is not precisely known, comparisons of performance results could be affected if exclusion rates are comparatively high or vary widely over time."

Her analysis of the NAEP data revealed some noteworthy trends. For example, in every subject, only the non-ELL student population showed improved performance between 2005 and 2007. Within-year comparisons showed that former ELL students scored higher than ELL students, and non-ELL students scored higher than both current and former ELL students. Furthermore,

the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students increased.

However, these data need to be considered with a degree of caution, because these NAEP results include only ELL students who could be assessed with available accommodations — not all ELL students.

Session V: Characteristics of Classrooms, Schools, and Districts that Employ Promising Teaching and Learning Strategies for English-Language Learners

Literacy Squared

Shifting from the discussion of ELL achievement gaps to exploring the policies and practices that show promise for improving ELL students' academic outcomes, **Kathy Escamilla**, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder, discussed findings from her work in a five-year longitudinal study called *Literacy Squared*.

In her presentation, "Are the Children Limited, or Are We?," Escamilla discussed what her research revealed about some of the practices and teacher beliefs that shape ELL instruction. While contending that many of these perceptions and teaching approaches need to change, she also admitted that implementing change has not been easy, particularly in the case of bilingual and ESL education.

"We've spent 35 years arguing over whether we should use the child's first language as the medium of instruction or not, but we've spent precious little time talking about the quality of instruction in terms of using those two languages," she said.

This state of affairs is clearly reflected in the teacher attitudes and instructional approaches documented in the Literacy Squared study, she said. For example, while few of the teachers participating in the study had formal training in teaching literacy in Spanish, most said they felt they were doing well in this arena. However, more than 90 percent said they felt frustrated with their ability to teach ESL effectively, and they all said their greatest area of need in professional development was in helping children make transitions from Spanish to English.

Her work also revealed that while the teachers verbalized a belief that Spanish literacy serves as a bridge to English, the study data indicated that they had internalized a belief that language interference was a major problem in teaching children to read and write in two languages. Escamilla argued that teachers need professional development focused on using what children know to help them develop their literacy skills.

‘Teachers of English-language learners need to adopt a more positive paradigm that embraces interlanguage, which assumes that one language supports and facilitates learning a second language.’ — Kathy Escamilla

The instructional implications of these somewhat polarized belief systems can be seen in how teachers interpret student writing errors. For example, teachers often blame writing errors, particularly spelling errors, on interference from a student’s first language (in this case, Spanish). As often as not, however, these errors are just as likely to be typical of monolingual writers.

“What’s happening is that we have kids using multiple strategies — they’re using what they know about English and what they know about Spanish,” she explained. “Preparing effective

teachers will require explicit preparation to enable them to understand stages of interlanguage and to use this knowledge during instruction.”

Promising Practices

Claire Sylvan, Founding Executive Director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, provided an exciting glimpse of how the schools in her program not only support ELL students but help them excel.

The Internationals Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing and supporting a network of high schools that serve late-entry immigrant ELL students. Internationals currently supports nine high schools in New York City and one in Oakland, Calif. All of the schools are public schools and small by design, the largest having 460 students. Their students represent a cross-section of immigrants from a variety of countries. Nearly all of the students are ELLs, and most are from low-income households.

Yet, she noted, “We outperform New York City schools on the Regents Tests, we have higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates, and our students go on to attend college at a rate well above national, state, and city averages.”

She said that the Internationals approach to teaching ELL students is based on five tenets: heterogeneity and collaboration; experiential learning; language and content integration; localized autonomy and responsibility; and one learning model for all.

“Our name, The International High Schools, confers prestige on our students and reflects the multicultural dynamic of our students,” Sylvan noted. Are there lessons from this system that can be useful for schools that serve a different configuration of students? “You bet,” Sylvan said.

Sessions VI and VII: Assessment of English-Language Learners

This session began with a theme that is central to the validity of ELL assessment — test accommodations. **Charlene Rivera**, a research professor and Executive Director at the Center for Equity and Excellence in Education at George Washington University, led a discussion of testing accommodations as they relate to ELLs.

In her presentation, “Defining and Refining Accommodations Appropriate for English-Language Learners,” Rivera explained what constitutes an accommodation and why accommodations are necessary for ELL test takers. She then delved into the research bases for testing accommodations, and discussed the challenges they present for state policymakers and teachers.

“The first language ELL students bring to an English-language assessment can interfere with their ability to demonstrate that they really know the content area. This is known as ‘construct-irrelevant variance,’” she said. Accommodations are a means of reducing construct-irrelevant variance related to English-language proficiency.

“An accommodation for ELLs is intended to help students demonstrate their knowledge of test *content* without altering the test *construct*,” Rivera continued, noting that accommodations are changes to testing procedures, testing materials, or the testing situation that allow a student to participate meaningfully in an assessment. Effective accommodations address the unique linguistic and sociocultural needs of the student without altering the test construct, and they provide results that are comparable to unaccommodated assessments.

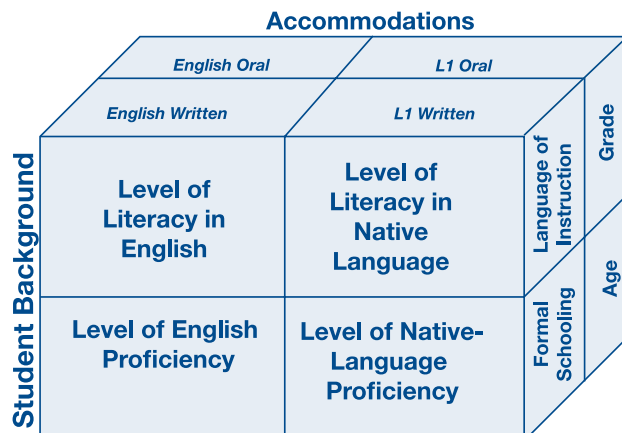
Accommodations can include:

- providing a dictionary or glossary that defines words specific to the content area
- using plain or simplified English on the test
- providing a bilingual dictionary that provides equivalent meanings of terms in another language
- dual-language or side-by-side presentation of items
- native-language versions of the test
- small-group administrations
- allowing extra testing time

Unfortunately, said Rivera, the research base for ELL-testing accommodations is very thin. Based on data from the approximately 16 experimental studies that focus on accommodations for ELLs, Rivera said the most promising accommodations for ELL test takers are dictionaries, glossaries, tests using plain language, and tests administered in the test taker’s native language, all administered with extended time. According to Rivera, the extra time is essential because the fact of using these accommodations takes more time than testing without the accommodation.

Rivera emphasized the importance of including a student’s background, language proficiency, level of literacy, and access to instruction in his or her native language before making decisions about accommodations. She illustrated these elements in a multidimensional puzzle mapping the student to the appropriate accommodation.

Mapping Accommodations to Student Background: A Multi-Dimensional Puzzle



For students at lower levels of English-language proficiency, the use of native language appears to be an effective accommodation with the following caveat: that these students are literate in their native language and/or have recently received instruction in the native language. At intermediate levels of English-language proficiency, simplified/modified English and customized glossaries are the most effective accommodations.

Currently, there is significant discrepancy among states with respect to the types of accommodations available to ELL test takers, and to what extent those accommodations address ELL needs.

Developing an ELL Research Agenda

Clearly, much more research is needed in all aspects of assessing ELLs, and ETS is doing its part to assure that this research is addressed in meaningful, valid ways. In “Academic Assessment of English-Language Learners: Foundational Research,” **John Young**, Senior Research Scientist in ETS’s Center for Validity Research, talked about ETS’s approach to developing long-range research agendas for its assessment programs.

“Our long-term goal is to ensure that all content-area assessments designed for use in grades K–12 (Title I assessments) are fair and valid for all examinees, and specifically ensuring that they’re fair for English-language learners,” he said. To achieve this goal, ETS follows three sequential steps:

- Develop a conceptual foundational research framework.
- Create a research agenda for all ELL examinees based on this framework.
- Design and carry out the necessary empirical studies on assessments taken by ELL examinees.

“The main emphasis of a research agenda for ELL examinees should be on fairness and comparability of the assessments,” Young explained.

With that in mind, he listed eight indicators of comparability for ELL examinees: Reliability, Factor Structure, Differential Item Functioning, Predictive Validity, Educational Decisions, Test Content, Testing Accommodations, and Test Timing.

Young then highlighted some of the work ETS is doing in addressing ELL assessment concerns, noting first that, central to its corporate mission, ETS must ensure that all of our assessments meet the highest standards for technical quality in terms of validity, fairness, and accessibility for all examinees, including ELLs.

“The creation of a comprehensive long-range agenda guides us in carrying out a systematic program of research on the validity and fairness of academic assessments for all examinees,” he concluded. “Implementation of the research agenda will ensure that academic assessments will

be of the highest technical quality and are valid and fair for all examinees, including English-language learners.”

Formative Assessment and Accountability

Continuing the theme of the need for better measures of ELL students’ academic performance and achievement, **Richard Durán** moved the discussion away from summative assessments like NAEP and NCLB-mandated state assessments and focused instead on formative assessment of ELL students.

Durán, a professor at the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, and formerly a Research Scientist at ETS, explained that formative assessments are used to assess student skill acquisition developmentally, in ways that can be used to help teachers understand how and what their students are learning, and adjust their instructions to their students’ learning needs.

‘Our common approach has been to separate assessment from authentic learning activity. And this introduces validity problems ... what if we consider formative assessment as part of instructional activity as present in the instruction or ordinary interactions?’ — Richard Durán

He went on to explain UCLA researcher Frederick Erickson’s concept of proximal assessment, which sees assessment as a continuous and open-ended process that occurs in the ongoing interactions among students, classroom materials, and the teacher. “By ‘proximal formative assessment,’ I mean the continual taking stock of students that teachers engage in by paying firsthand observational attention to students during the ongoing course of instruction, careful attention on specific aspects of students mastering skills ... as instruction is taking place in real time,” he explained.

In developing such assessments, Durán said, it’s important to “step back and look at context ... we need to take into account how cultural contexts are working and affect how people are interpreting what they are doing. We also need to have an understanding of the cognitive learning tasks and instructional activities that are intended to target the attainment of goals and their intended goals, and we need to consider the evidence of learning.”

Looking forward, Durán said that it’s important for those involved in ELL education at all levels to “maintain research and practice momentum for proximal formative assessment to understand and improve ELL students’ acquisition of academic language skills.”

Moving the assessment discussion out of the classroom and back into the public forum, **David Francis**, Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology and Director of Texas Institute for Measurement, Evaluation, and Statistics, University of Houston, highlighted issues surrounding assessment as it relates to accountability. In particular, he examined some of the unique aspects of the ELL subgroup of test takers that challenge accountability assessment programs, and suggested modifications that may address these issues.

According to Francis, unlike any other demographic groupings (gender, ethnicity, and learning disability, for example), membership in the ELL category is dynamic. And, he pointed out, the defining characteristic of ELLs (i.e., language proficiency) is “causally linked to the outcomes of interest — that is, content-area achievement.” In other words, as students become proficient in English, they no longer count as members of the group.

What that means, he explained, is that “the best performers are always being taken out of the ELL

subgroup for the purpose of comparisons.” This demographic shift “skews the numbers,” he said, making it appear that the overall performance of ELL test takers is going down because the percentage of students functioning at lower levels increases as new, low-performance ELL students enter schools and those who are fluent in English are moved out of the ELL classification.

Francis said that allowing FEP (fluent or fully English proficient) students to count in assessments for up to two years is an improvement that does boost the overall percent proficient within the ELL category. However, it does not solve the problem, because it does not:

- allow us to determine the academic achievement of ELLs who become proficient in English
- allow us to determine the long-term achievement outcomes for children who enter school as ELLs
- provide schools with actionable information about their ELL students’ performance
- solve the problem of aggregation bias when demographics are shifting

He suggested that one way to address this problem would be to create a category of fluent ELLs, keep that category intact throughout children’s time in school, and report that out for subgroups in every grade and year. It would also be helpful, Francis noted, to report achievement results broken down by language proficiency, because that information is actionable at the school level. “It lets you know if you’re doing a good job for students at the lowest level of language and at the highest level,” he said.

Francis concluded his comments by advocating for the establishment of goals that are attainable in a year. “We should expect all students to become proficient in English, and we should

expect all students to become proficient in the content areas. But in every year, we need to tailor those expectations to where the students are. If we do that, students will produce more movement toward goals than if we set goals that are unattainable for a given year.”

Session VIII: English-Language Learners with Special Learning Needs

“English-language learners with disabilities were once referred to as the triple-threat students because they have three strikes against them: disability, limited English proficiency, and lower-socioeconomic status,” **Leonard Baca**, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado, Boulder, told listeners to his presentation, “Approaches and Strategies for Serving English-Language Learners with Disabilities.”

“Now we talk about three strengths: human learning potential, native language, and unique culture,” he added. According to Baca, the main approach for serving ELLs with disabilities is known as Bilingual/ESL Education. The approach has evolved over the past 35 years, but it can be defined as “the use of the home language and the home culture along with ESL in an individually designed program of special instruction for the student.”

While this sounds very good, Baca argued that we really don’t know if we are identifying the right children as ELL students with disabilities, nor do we know if we’re providing them with the right services. “Today, meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse and exceptional students must be done within a new context,” he noted. “This new context involves how we’re responding to NCLB and RTI,” or Response to Intervention.

RTI is a proposed comprehensive model of instruction that includes both regular and special education. It differs from the traditional,

prereferral model because, rather than waiting until a child fails before beginning the referral process, with RTI ideally all students get appropriate instruction from the beginning.

Who Are ELLs with Disabilities?

According to **Laurene Christensen**, a lecturer with the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) at the University of Minnesota, “Contrary to what some people might believe, the majority of students identified as English-language learners with disabilities are those with high-incidence disabilities who would likely be working on the grade-level standards-based curriculum in the mainstream classroom.”

Christensen reported that in 2005, NCEO examined the participation guidelines for students with disabilities for all 50 states, and found that all states have participation guidelines for students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, only half the states have specified policies for English-language learners who have IEPs.

“An important aspect of increasing participation in assessments — and of increasing the validity of results from those assessments — is the provision of accommodations,” she said, and states appear to have identified accommodations for ELLs and ELLs with disabilities. She added that many questions arise from consideration of English-Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments and ELLs with disabilities, including their validity for use with ELLs with disabilities.

“ELLs with disabilities have been below the radar for some time now. Yet, we can see progress,” Christensen concluded. “States are beginning to have policies on how ELLs with disabilities are included in statewide assessments and in English-language proficiency assessments. Some states have begun to publicly report the performance of these students.” Still, she said, “much work remains to be done to improve outcomes for English-language learners with disabilities.”

Session IX: Innovative Policies for Developing Teachers to Work with English-Language Learners

Joseph A. Aguerrebere, Jr., President and CEO of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), began the last session with his presentation, “Toward Common Standards for Teachers: The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.”

“Is it likely that a child growing up today and going to American schools is actually going to get the kind of support he or she needs?” he asked. “If I ask myself that question, the jury’s still out.”

There is a wide variation in the educational programs and the abilities of the teachers provided to children across the United States. On the one hand, this hallmark of American education can be a plus because “it can help to stimulate innovation and creativity in different ways to do things,” he said. “On the other hand, this wide variation has led to tremendous disparities in how children experience education.”

After providing some background on the NBPTS and its teacher certification program, Aguerrebere urged members of the ELL education community to think about how we can get good practice to become standard practice, so that it’s not a matter of chance whether a student will receive a good education. “It shouldn’t matter where I live and in what state that I live [whether] I’m going to get access to a really highly competent teacher who is working in a school that is organized for success,” he said.

Margarita Calderón, Senior Research Scientist and Professor at the School of Education, Johns Hopkins University, provided insights into innovative policies for the professional development of teachers who work with ELLs.

Noting that there’s very little research on teacher education, professional development, staff development, and preservice that can be called

scientific research, Calderón reviewed findings from an effort by the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth to examine staff development.

What they learned, she said, was that effective professional development for teachers who work with language-minority students is very different from standard professional development. In particular, she noted, professional development needs to be continuous throughout the school year, for several years. These teachers need:

- preservice that integrates language, literacy, and subject-matter knowledge for teaching diverse student populations
- staff development that is outcomes-based, comprehensive, and provides ample time and tools for self-assessment and improvement
- coaches and administrators who support the type of instruction ELLs need through their own extensive professional development
- increased funding for schools, research, and restructuring Institutions of Higher Education

‘Effective professional development for teachers who work with language-minority students is very different from standard professional development.’ — Margarita Calderon

And ELL education in general needs “research, research, research,” she said. Specifically, we need research that examines how to better measure the impact of preservice and professional-development programs; compares models for preservice; compares professional-development models; and offers large-scale replication of effective models.

* * * * *

Guadalupe Valdés, Professor at Stanford University, concluded the symposium by summarizing the two-day proceedings and identifying areas of consensus. She reminded us that the purpose of the conference was to bring people together, to provide them with information so that they might bring about social change, and that scholarship can and does drive equity.

“We agreed that the important issues have to do not with whether bilingual education is or is not better than English-language medium instruction, but with the actual size of the achievement gap between ELLs and mainstream students.

“We lack longitudinal data. We have varying definitions of former ELL students, reclassified students, etc., and this makes state-to-state comparisons meaningless.

“We learned that in testing ELLs, we need to consider the students’ language proficiency, level of literacy, and access to instruction in the native language before making decisions about accommodations.

“We were affirmed in knowing that we need more research to understand how to best support teachers in their practice.

“For many of us who have worked on the problems of English-language learners for a very long time, it was particularly encouraging to have discussed them here, to know that researchers at ETS are listening and that they are working to understand the challenges of assessment for this particular group of learners ...

“This conference has provided us important information about English-language learners, and it can help us work together both to close the achievement gap *and* to inform policy. I am quite sure that each of us found at least one key idea in these two days that we will take with us to our future work.”

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