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ABSTRACT

Alternatives to standard language proficiency testing of bilingual or language minority students are discussed in this educational policy bulletin. The New Mexico strategy is described, which uses multiple assessment techniques to identify students' home language, assess oral English proficiency through standardized testing and teacher observation, and measure students' content skill areas included on state competency tests. Recommendations and implications for policy and practice at the state, local, and department of education levels are presented. (LMI)

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Assessing Language Proficiency: More than One Way to Skin a Cat

A predominant trend in school-aged populations through the next several decades is the growth in the number of bilingual or language minority students in the southwestern region (Kelly, 1988). Educational policymakers and practitioners will have increasing need for measures of language proficiency to make viable instructional and programmatic decisions regarding the correct placement of language minority students, as well as the appropriate curriculum, instruction, and testing of such students. Without accurate measure of the students' language skills, educators run the risk of placing them incorrectly in special education when they need bilingual education or some type of language instruction, and of using inappropriate testing techniques to measure the students' content knowledge.

Importance of Language Assessment

The nature of language proficiency is complex. It includes the ability to listen, speak, read, and write in many kinds of settings from informal social gatherings to formal, cognitively demanding academic settings such as reading a science textbook (Hamayan, Kwiat & Perlman, 1985). By the time most children start school, they already have the skills to learn, share ideas, and converse with their friends and teachers in the language they learned at home. On the playground and in dramatic play activities, they learn and develop their proficiency in the language of social interactions. In the classroom, children develop other language skills as they learn the languages of specific academic disciplines, such as mathematics, science, or social studies.

If the language students learn at home, however, is not the language they use in the classroom, language proficiency is difficult to determine. Teachers and administrators may find it hard to get a true measure of the proficiency of these language minority students, and thus be able to "make viable decisions" concerning the placement, instruction, and testing of such children.

Determining a child's language proficiency is a complex process for two reasons. First, bilingual students vary in degree of proficiency in their two languages. In order to

provide these students with the appropriate curriculum (Hamayan, et al., 1985), it is important to differentiate those students who have achieved a high level of proficiency in English from those who are truly limited in their ability to function in English. Second, the effects of language on learning are so pervasive that assessment techniques may fail to detect what a minority language student actually knows simply because of a mismatch between the student's native language and the language used on the test (Cummins, 1984).

Because language proficiency encompasses several language skills used in different settings, educators should use an assessment technique that integrates a variety of measures to determine students' language skills in several settings.

The New Mexico Strategy

Making responsible decisions for all students has been a longtime concern for education decisionmakers in states with language minority students. Educators are particularly concerned in New Mexico, home not only to Spanish and English, but also to at least eight Native American languages, each with numerous dialects. Since the adoption of a statewide student testing program, language assessment has gained importance in New Mexico as it has throughout the Southwest. Recognizing that the English

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used on state standardized tests did not match the languages of certain students, the New Mexico State Department of Education has developed procedures that not only exempt such students from taking the test in English, but also allow local districts to use alternatives to standardized tests in assessing student achievement.

To help local educators use such language assessment procedures, the New Mexico State Department of Education and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) co-sponsored a two-day institute to teach participants, who were teachers and/or local school administrators, about multiple assessment techniques that help them to (1) identify students' home language, (2) assess oral English language proficiency using a standardized test supplemented with teacher observation, and (3) measure language minority students' achievement in content skill areas included on the state competency tests.

Identification of home language. First, language minority and bilingual students must be identified. The easiest way is to ask if a language other than English is used in the home (Hamayan, et al., 1985). Generally, three types of instruments can give such information: home language surveys, student language surveys, and teacher observation.

Completion of a home language survey should be part of every district's registration process, but school personnel responsible for collecting data on home languages need to be aware of certain constraints. They must be aware of the impact of some linguistic and cultural factors. Parents who are not proficient in English themselves may be unable to fill out a survey form, or they may be reluctant to admit to the presence of a native language for fear of negative repercussions on their children. Because young children usually are not the best sources of information about the languages they speak, student surveys should be used only with older students. Information obtained from students and their parents or primary care-

givers can be substantiated by teacher observations.

Assessment of oral English proficiency. The assessment of language minority students should be a thorough diagnostic process designed to provide information about the students' educational needs. Typically, local districts use norm-referenced, standardized tests such as the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL), Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM), or the IDEA Oral Language Proficiency Tests (IPT). Such tests measure discrete aspects of language (e.g., the ability to distinguish between pairs of sounds).

Another approach calls for more holistic or integrative assessment procedures developed on the assumption that language skills—talking, listening, reading, writing—are inter-related. Canales (in press) and Hamayan, et al. (1985), suggest that a student's language skills also should be assessed in this integrated manner using teacher-constructed response techniques such as language samples, interviews, story re-telling, cloze tests, dictation, and writing samples to arrive at a valid, holistic measure of a child's language ability.

Whenever possible, such measures should be used in both English and the child's native language. Test administrators may require the assistance of an adult (not the parent) who speaks that language well and can communicate fairly well in English. If the local school district does not have qualified personnel, nor appropriate tests in the native language, a short sample of the child's writing in the native language and the answers to the following questions will provide some clues as to the level of the student's academic achievement:

- How many years of formalized schooling has the child completed in the native language?
- Does the student read materials written in the native language?

- What is the level of educational attainment of the student's parents in the native language?
- Does the student come from a household that has access to materials printed in the native language?

Measurement of the content skill areas included on state competency tests. Finally, determining language minority students' content-area academic skills and level of conceptual development is vital for making decisions about placing and teaching them. Content area tests, however, are not always available in a student's native language. Whenever possible, districts should use standardized tests in the child's home language that are equivalent to the state-adopted test, or alternative procedures that involve the systematic translation of competencies and skills to the child's home language by an adult proficient in both languages.

In any case, rather than relying solely on translated versions of the district-adopted standardized tests, Hamayan et al. (1985) suggest that teachers and local administrators use **observation, interviewing, student work samples, and other types of information as indirect measures.** With students who have immigrated from another country, local school district personnel should collect as much information as they can about the length and quality of the student's school experience both in the native country and in the United States. Such data might include scores on standardized tests and the student's office academic record in both countries.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While the implementation of language assessment procedures rests with teachers, principals, and local school administrators,

historical precedent has shown that without legislative intervention, effective school practices may not always be equitable. To ensure equity...legislators must take an active role in sponsoring legislation that enables the creation of

programs that are flexible, sensitive to student needs, and above all, funded (Canales, in press).

Implications for action by decisionmakers in the legislature, state department of education, and in the local school district or classroom include the following:

State policymakers should

- mandate appropriate identification and placement of students whose native language is not English.
- fund assessment and instructional programs for language-minority students.
- establish guidelines and a system of rewards and sanctions to support compliance.
- provide technical assistance to districts that are unable to comply the first time.

State Departments of Education should

- establish standards for identifying and placing language minority students, as well as exiting them from bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) programs.
- coordinate a statewide cross-disciplinary research and development group to develop assessment criteria and procedures appropriate for the different areas of the state.
- develop or modify a language proficiency rating scale for statewide use to ensure consistency across districts in determining listening and speaking proficiency.
- pilot test assessment procedures and measures to ensure comprehensibility and applicability across the state.
- train local teachers and school administrators to ensure that they all understand the use and administration of the assessment procedures and measures.

- monitor language assessment practices at local school districts.
- conduct periodic evaluations of language assessment practices as well as tracking new developments in the field to determine the need to update or otherwise modify criteria, procedures, and measures.

Local school district personnel should

- train administrators and teachers responsible for testing language proficiency to use the procedures and measures of language assessment.
- follow State Department of Education language assessment procedures.
- develop a plan to administer language assessment measures consistently at pre-determined times, and follow the plan.
- review student performance on language proficiency assessments.
- provide evaluative feedback to the State Department of Education about the effectiveness of the procedures and measures.

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