CRESST

POLICY BRIEF 10

National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, & Student Testing

UCLA | Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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Improving the Validity of English Language Learner Assessment Systems

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing group of students in American public schools. According to Payán and Nettles (2008), the ELL population doubled in 23 states between 1995 and 2005. Yet ELL achievement remains among the lowest of all students. For example, on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 72% of 8th-grade ELL students scored below basic in mathematics compared to 26% of non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Drawing from a 3-year research effort funded by the U.S. Department of Education, UCLA's National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) has developed a list of recommendations for improvements in the validity of assessment systems for ELL students. Our recommendations include the areas of

1. English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards and Assessments,

2. ELL Classification and Reclassification,

3. Content Assessments for ELL Students,

4. ELL Test Accommodations, and

5. Teacher Capacity and ELL Students' Opportunity to Learn.

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1. English Language Proficiency Standards and Assessments

Recommendation 1.1 :: ELP standards and ELP assessments should be aligned with each other and with the related content standards.

Detail: Valid ELL assessment systems begin with rigorous state standards that drive all parts of learning, including state content standards, ELP standards, and ELP assessments. Our studies found that some states have clear mismatches between the proficiency levels articulated in their ELP standards proficiency levels and those in their ELP assessments. Close alignment of these components helps schools to know if ELL students are meeting the standards and helps teachers use the assessment results to adjust instruction.

Recommendation 1.2 :: ELP standards should include essential academic English language requirements.

Detail: Our study findings revealed substantial variation in the degree and complexity of academic English contained on state ELP assessments. We encourage states to revisit their ELP standards to assure consistency with the best available knowledge on how students develop competency in academic English, a research literature which has grown substantially in recent years.

2. ELL Classification and Reclassification

Recommendation 2.1 :: States should clearly define ELL terms and be consistent in their use.

Detail: Different terms and definitions for ELL students (e.g., non-English proficient, limited English proficient, language minority, or reclassified fluent English learner) may imply different understandings of and attitudes toward ELL students. Simple, consistent definitions should be used in all documents, which can help practitioners implement ELL policies appropriately.

Recommendation 2.2 :: States should evaluate and standardize their identification, classification, and reclassification criteria for ELL students.

Detail: State policy should specify the methods and criteria for identifying, classifying, and reclassifying ELLs, plus whether and how local districts may modify the criteria. If multiple criteria are used, policy guidelines should specify how each criterion should be employed.

Recommendation 2.3 :: States should examine their reclassification rates and evaluate the effects of their reclassification policies.

Detail: Our studies found that different reclassification policies were associated with different ranges in achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. We recommend that states, districts, and schools regularly track student performance subsequent to reclassification and use the data to evaluate potential positive or negative consequences for reclassified and long-term ELL students. States should revise policies if necessary.

Recommendation 2.4 :: States should create a longitudinal database system to provide validity evidence for ELL assessments and to support appropriate decisions for ELL students.

Detail: Longitudinal databases to support ELL identification and reclassification decisions should include unique student identification numbers that are used consistently across schools. Databases should contain detailed background information to enable investigations of the validity and effects of decisions from the assessments across ELL subgroups and to guide instruction for students' specific needs.

3. Content Assessments for ELL Students

Recommendation 3.1 :: States should include explicit item-writing rules and specific principles in their content test Requests for Proposals, specifying that test developers avoid unnecessary linguistic complexity on test items.

Detail: As with state ELP assessments, we found a broad and varied range of linguistic complexity among state content assessments. Application of systematic, purposive item development rules can help reduce unnecessary linguistic complexities that confound ELL students' ability to show what they know.

Recommendation 3.2 :: Test validation should include procedures to identify and reduce potential item bias in content items.

Detail: We recommend that content reviews of linguistic complexity be combined with differential item functioning analyses for ELL students to identify test questions that may be biased against ELLs, that is, those questions that ELL students miss at a substantially higher rate than non-ELL students of the same ability level. Biased items should be carefully examined and revised or replaced as appropriate.

4. ELL Test Accommodations

Recommendation 4.1 :: States should provide comprehensive accommodation guidelines based on current research for selecting and using ELL accommodations. Assign responsibility of disseminating guidelines to a specific person.

Detail: We found that detailed state accommodation guidelines were associated with better school and teacher knowledge of accommodation policies and procedures, as well as more consistent implementation of and compliance with state ELL provisions. We recommend that state policy accommodations should specify:

- Who is eligible for accommodations?
- Who makes accommodation decisions?
- Accommodations assignment criteria
- Allowable and prohibited accommodations
- A key person to help teachers and school administrators accurately implement accommodations

Recommendation 4.2 :: States and districts should conduct regular professional development meetings to inform both content and ELL teachers about appropriate accommodations use.

Detail: Our research findings showed that few teachers, especially content teachers, were provided sufficient opportunities to understand and implement existing state ELL accommodation policies. Professional development should include information on the latest ELL assessment and accommodation research findings plus empirical evidence of what and how accommodations best work for ELL students.

Recommendation 4.3 :: State guidelines should require systematic recording on a statewide database of specific accommodations provided to individual students. Such data can be used to evaluate the validity and efficacy of accommodations.

Detail: Entry of accommodation data in a statewide database can promote transparency across different levels of reporting and increase the accuracy of school accommodation records. The information will also help states identify successful and less successful accommodation strategies for specific student groups and individual students.

Recommendation 4.4 :: States and districts should monitor the use of accommodation guidelines regularly to ensure consistent application of accommodation policies.

Detail: An effective accommodations monitoring process can help policy makers evaluate and improve local schools' accommodation usage and further inform policies and guidelines. Regular monitoring will boost active implementation of accommodation guidelines, improve data-recording practices, and promote comparable data from one locale to the next.

5. Teacher Capacity and ELL Students' Opportunity to Learn

Recommendation 5.1 :: Encourage schools to use an integrated approach to developing content and English language proficiencies, simultaneously teaching academic language and content knowledge.

Detail: Our study findings demonstrated that many content assessments contain academic vocabulary that may be difficult for ELL students. Schools should integrate academic language instruction along with content instruction to improve assessment validity and increase ELLs' opportunity to learn.

Recommendation 5.2 :: Encourage and build teachers' capacity to use appropriate ELL accommodations during classroom instruction and assessment.

Detail: Our studies indicated that even direct linguistic-support accommodations (e.g., English glossary and reading aloud the entire test) do not help ELL students on state content tests if students have not previously used the same accommodations in classrooms. State policies and professional development should highly encourage regular use of accommodations during the normal school day, not just for testing.

Recommendation 5.3 :: Pre-service teacher education and post-service professional development should expand and integrate ELL assessment and accommodations knowledge and strategies.

Detail: We found that both content teachers and ELL specialists often lacked sufficient knowledge about successful ELL assessment and accommodation strategies. We also found a lack of sufficient communication between these two important groups. Pre-service and post-service teacher education should address both of these vital needs.

CALL TO ACTION

The ELL performance gap is one of the most challenging issues confronting American education. We strongly encourage policy makers to work closely with their staffs and other ELL experts to implement the recommendations in this policy guide. We also call for expanded research in the field to improve assessment systems and better support ELL achievement.

For a more detailed report, please refer to our Policy Brief 10 - Full Report also available at cresst.org.

References

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