Toward a "Common Definition of English Learner"

A Brief Defining Policy and Technical Issues and Opportunities for State Assessment Consortia

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Background

The U.S. Department of Education (USED) requires states participating in either of the two Race to the Top assessment consortia (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC]), as well as those participating in either of the two Enhanced Assessment Grant (EAG) English language proficiency assessment consortia (WIDA's Assessment Services Supporting English Learners through Technology Systems [ASSETS] and CCSSO's English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century [ELPA21]), to establish a "common definition of English Learner." Specifically, each consortium "must define the term in a manner that is uniform across member states and consistent with section 9101 (25)[1] of the ESEA" (US Department Of Education, 2010, p. 20). Although the two consortia developing alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS)[2] are *not* required to develop a common definition of English learner (EL), their member states largely overlap with these assessment consortia and they will include their English learners in these assessments. Having a common EL definition that agrees with the definition adopted by the other consortia is clearly desirable, if not essential.[3]

As discussed below, this requirement presents substantial challenges that will call for a carefully coordinated, multiyear effort within and across consortia member states. The effort will need to proceed in stages and encompass several critical decisions. Since the federal definition of English learners posits that their level of English language proficiency (ELP) may deny them the ability to perform proficiently on academic content assessments, a relationship between students' ELP and content assessment results must be established. Recently developed empirical methods illustrate how this might be done.[4] However, this requires operational data from all consortia assessments. Since assessment scaling and academic content performance standards across states and consortia are needed to conduct such empirical analyses, scaling and standard-setting for all assessments would first need to be completed. Very likely, changes to state policy and regulations will also be required, which implies potential legislative or state board of education action. Some key issues and opportunities are highlighted below.

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[1] Section 9101(25) LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT- The term limited English proficient, when used with respect to an individual, means an individual — (A) who is aged 3 through 21; (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school; (C)(i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; (ii)(I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and (D) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual — (i) the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments described in section 1111(b)(3); (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.

[2] The Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment System Consortium (DLM), and the National Center and State Collaborative Partnership (NCSC).

[3] This may be complicated as communication issues are inherent in many of the disabilities of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Data from 18 states (Towles-Reeves et al., 2012) indicate that approximately 13% (range of 3% to 36%) of students with significant cognitive disabilities are ELs.

[4] See Cook, Linquanti, Chinen, & Jung (2012).

Issues and Opportunities

Addressing Cross-Consortium Participation. There are different permutations of consortia participation as illustrated below. States in *any* of the four consortia must address the "uniform manner" definitional requirement *within* and — where applicable — *across* their respective consortia.

Academic/ELP	ASSETS	ELPA21	Stand-Alone
Smarter Balanced	AL*, DE, HI, ME, MO, MT, NV, NH, NC, ND*, PA*, SD, VT, WI, WY	IA, KS, OR, SC, WA, WV	CA, CT, ID, MI
PARCC	AL*, CO, DC, IL, MA, MD, MS, NJ, NM, ND*, OK, PA*, RI	AR, FL, LA, OH	AZ, GA, IN, KY, NY, TN
Stand-Alone	MN, VA	NE	AK, TX , UT

*Currently advisory states in both Smarter Balanced and PARCC
Sources: Smarter Balanced; Achieve, Inc.; WIDA; and CCSSO. (Consortia participation as of January 2013)

Identifying Potential English Learners. States currently use a variety of methods for identifying potential EL students. Home Language Surveys (HLSs) are primarily used for this purpose in all but four states, but there is substantial variation in survey questions' phrasing, content, and practices across states (Bailey & Kelly, 2012). Also, research has identified key concerns (e.g., construct relevance, information accuracy, and inconsistent implementation) that threaten the validity of initial identification of potential EL students (see Bailey & Kelly, 2012). HLSs – and possibly a single, commonly used HLS – would need to be standardized and validated.

Establishing Initial English Learner Classification. Once identified as a potential EL, states use a variety of means to confirm (or disconfirm) EL status and establish initial EL classification. According to a recent report by the National Research Council (NRC, 2011), 27 states use a screener/placement test.[5] Seventeen states allow school districts to select the language proficiency assessment used for initial classification, though they provide a list of tests from which the district can select. Four states use their current ELP test for the initial proficiency screening,[6] while two states[7] allow districts to choose between the state ELP test and a screener. States within a given consortium (ELP or academic) would need to have consistent initial EL classification tools and procedures, or, in the case of states in overlapping (ELP and academic) consortia, demonstrate that their tools and procedures lead to comparable initial EL classification results.

Defining "English proficient." Federal law requires states to annually assess ELs in four domains: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (section 1111(b)(7)[8] of the ESEA). The law also requires states to monitor

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[5] Of these 27, 18 use one of the screener tests developed by the WIDA Consortium (the W-APT or the MODEL); 3 use the LAS Links Placement test, 4 use their own screener; 1 uses the LAB-R; and one uses the Woodcock Muñoz Language Survey.
[6] Alaska, Arizona, California, and Florida
[7] Connecticut and Nevada
[8] Section 1111(b)(7) ACADEMIC ASSESSMENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY - Each State plan shall demonstrate that local educational agencies in the State will, beginning not later than school year 2002–2003, provide for an annual assessment of English proficiency (measuring

EL students' progress in attaining ELP in these domains and in comprehension. This requirement has motivated states to create domain (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and composite (oral, literacy, comprehension, and overall) scores for their ELP assessments. Virtually all states use some form of linear weighted overall composite score for progress monitoring, attainment, and accountability. However, states combine domain scores to create the overall composite score in different ways. For example, the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) weights each domain equally (0.25 x Listening + 0.25 x Speaking + 0.25 x Reading + 0.25 x Writing)[9] to create its overall composite score. ACCESS for ELLs (the WIDA consortium's assessment) weights its overall composite in favor of literacy skills (0.15 x Listening + 0.15 x Speaking + 0.35 x Reading + 0.35 x Writing) and the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) weights its composite such that reading has prominence (0.05 x Listening + 0.05 x Speaking + 0.75 x Reading + 0.15 x Writing).[10] In effect, what it means to be proficient on CELDT, ACCESS for ELLs, or TELPAS, based on the overall composite, is very different. A clear articulation of what "English proficient" means on ELP assessments used by states within and across consortia would therefore be a minimum requirement. Without careful consideration of composite score weighting on new assessments, claims about comparability in what it means to be English proficient on ELP measures used within and across consortia will be unsupportable.

Reclassifying English Learners. States also use a variety of criteria in reclassifying (exiting) ELs to former EL status. According to data collected in 2006-07 school year (Wolf et al., 2008), over 70% (34) of 48 states surveyed use multiple (between two and six) criteria in reclassification decisions. Specifically:
- 12 states use an ELP assessment only, while 2 states use only district-established criteria
- The remaining 34 states surveyed use multiple criteria:
  - 11 consider the ELP test and one other criterion
    - 7 states additionally use content-area achievement scores
    - 3 states additionally use district-level criteria
    - 1 state additionally uses school-level criteria
  - 23 states use the ELP test and *two to five* additional kinds of criteria, including those mentioned above as well as parent/guardian input and "other."

Adding to this variation, many states permit locally established criteria that vary *within* a state, thus leading to non-uniform, within-state definitions of EL.

At the very least, members of ELP consortia would need to identify a theoretically sound, empirically informed performance standard or performance range on the shared ELP assessment. Studies will need to examine relationships of ELP results from the ASSETS and ELPA21 assessments to the academic performance outcomes on the Smarter Balanced and PARCC summative assessments. Such studies would help to identify the point at which EL students are identified as having sufficient English skills to be considered English proficient. These studies, which will need to be done over time using empirical data from several states, can provide helpful insights and recommendations for consortia policymakers' consideration. This can in turn lead to a much more comparable, aligned set of performance standards across consortia member states for defining ELs and students ready to be reclassified as former ELs. Concomitantly, studies need to be conducted on classification and additional reclassification criteria that lead to informed decisions, used in concert with ELP screener or assessment results. Taken together, these studies can provide states, regardless of consortia membership (ELP and academic content), with

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students' oral language [further clarified as listening and speaking by section 3121(d)(1)], reading, and writing skills in English) of all students with limited English proficiency in the schools served by the State educational agency….
[9] In grades 2–12. In grades K–1, Reading and Writing are weighted 0.05 each while Listening and Speaking are weighted 0.45 each.
[10] See the 2011 Texas Student Assessment Program Interpreting Assessment Reports document at www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3282&menu_id=793.

tools to adequately identify and classify ELs, and reclassify ELs with respect to their English language proficiency.

Conclusion

The complex policy and technical issues involved in developing a common EL definition are going to require a well-defined roadmap of processes and decisions for all consortia members to enact over time. Given the different permutation of states involved in the four consortia, this work is best engaged via close coordination and frequent communication within and across consortia. All phases and criteria — including initial identification, classification, and reclassification — will need to be addressed, using all consortia assessments.

It is prudent to approach the issue of creating a common definition of an English learner as a multi-staged, multiyear, deliberative process. As assessments come on line, teachers begin to teach to the Common Core State Standards, and educational systems align to the expectations of college- and career-readiness, a refined understanding of English language proficiency will emerge. States and the consortia to which they belong should plan now for this process. To that end, a forthcoming paper under the sponsorship of CCSSO's English Language Learner (ELL) Assessment Advisory Committee will offer further guidance on issues and opportunities described above, and discuss how states and consortia might proceed toward a common definition of English Learner.

Summary of Recommendations

1. *Consortia states should adopt a common, standardized, and validated Home Language Survey, which can be used to identify potential ELs.*
2. *States within a given consortium (ELP or academic) should have consistent initial EL classification tools and procedures, or, in the case of states in overlapping (ELP and academic) consortia, demonstrate that their tools and procedures lead to comparable initial EL classification results.*
3. *States within and across consortia should clearly establish what "English proficient" means on all ELP assessments used. In doing so, they should carefully consider how differing composite score domain weights affect claims about comparability of the "English proficient" performance standard across ELP measures.*
4. *Consortia states should identify a theoretically sound, empirically informed performance standard or performance range on any commonly shared ELP assessment. In doing so, they should examine the relationship of both ELP and academic content assessment results.*
5. *Consortia states should move toward comparable, standardized and validated reclassification criteria, in addition to ELP assessment results, that schools and districts might use in EL reclassification decisions.*
6. *Consortia states, the US Department of Education, and federal and state policymakers should recognize that establishing a common definition of English learner will require a multi-staged, multiyear, deliberative process.*

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