Case Study: International High School at Langley Park

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An international school shares their process for developing performance assessments for English language learners.

The International High School at Langley Park (IHSLP) opened during the 2015-2016 school year. By the fourth year of operation, the school will be home to 400 English language learners (ELLs) new to the United States. Working in partnership with the Internationals Network for Public Schools, the school is designed around the "HELLO principles" – five core principles guiding the Internationals' approach to supporting ELLs:

- **H**eterogeneity and collaboration;

- **E**xperiential and project-based learning;

- **L**anguage and content integration;

- **L**ocalized autonomy and responsibility; and

- **O**ne learning model for all.[1]

It takes three to five years to develop oral proficiency in a new language and four to seven years to develop written academic proficiency. With only four years of high school, our students need every lesson to be purposeful and accessible (Hakuta, Butler & Witt 2000).

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE: PROJECT GOALS AND GRADES (FRISHTAH WASSL)

Our school, IHSLP, is the best school I've gone to. Everything in IHSLP is different. In our school, we do projects. This week I got a project from physical education that taught me how to make my fitness plan. I learned things I did not know, such as the SMART goals formula – setting goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

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1 See http://internationalsnps.org/about-us/internationals-approach/.

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Whenever I wanted to exercise, I could only keep it up for about six months, and then I would give up. Now I know the goals that I was setting were too high and not realistic. From this project, I learned that my goals must be SMART. The PE teacher interviewed us on our projects, and she made sure we were on the right track. That's why this is the school I love!

To me, it is really important that I know the goal of the project. In my middle school, I did not know why I got a C in my first quarter, and I was not that willing to ask the teacher for a reason. Now I can see the details about my grades and why I get them. Our grades are not just A, B, C. We are evaluated on how we summarize, analyze, gather information, or make responsible decisions, as well as many other skills. I really like this detailed type of grading, and it helps me reflect on the quality of the project that I turn in.

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE: RETHINKING PEDAGOGY AND MASTERY (CHRISTINE WILKIN)

Upon starting work at IHSLP – with a 100 percent ELL population – I thought I was prepared. I had taught in China and in Haiti. I taught art at a 50 percent ELL middle school, where every ELL student took art as an elective because it was thought to be the easiest class for students like them. And I agreed; art was visual. I could demonstrate the work, and ELL students would be successful.

For the first half of the year I used a lot of the strategies that I had learned to teach ELLs. I had word banks, diagrams, demonstrations, visuals, and examples of what I was teaching. But my students were not engaged, and they were not performing. I thought I was giving them everything they needed to be able to do the task, but students were still not completing assignments. What was wrong?

I started to look at how I organized the lessons. The classic "I do, we do, you do" was not working. ELLs did not understand me when I was speaking in front of a class and demonstrating; they had no background knowledge or language to grasp it. When they transitioned into "we do," the students with higher language proficiency would do most of the task while those with lower language skills copied. When it was time for "you do," some students could do it while others just checked out.

At IHSLP, I completely changed the way I was teaching and presenting information. I start with "you do," to build background information. Then "we do," to try to understand what they just did together. Then I wrap up with "I do," and we discuss it.

Now students in my class are presented with a unit made up of five modules and a mastery project. At the beginning of the unit, they read a summary of what they will learn, what tasks they will need to complete, what project they will be making. They will see a map of which skills they will be assessed on along the way. Students start to get the rhythm of the modules, and that consistency allows them to become more independent with their learning.

Within the unit, each module now has a purpose.

- Module 1: background knowledge, struggling, questioning, and experimenting

- Module 2: history and cultural connections

- Module 3: gathering information about the content

- Module 4: start planning their creation

- Module 5: plan their project

- Module 6: mastery project

For example, my students recently worked in groups to make a stop-motion animation movie. They watched "Gumby" videos, built background knowledge by writing about how the characters moved, what materials they observed, and how things were transformed. They went on YouTube and found another stop-motion animation video, researched its history, wrote about what they saw. They looked at tutorials and downloaded video editing software to learn about how to make stop-motion animation, then practiced making one with some photographs that I gave them. So now they understood: here's an example; here's the story behind it; now I know how to make it. And then they got into groups to form a production company, and each student had a different role: director, animator, photographer, video editor.

They needed to work together to create the project, and they were being assessed on different skills: planning (submitting a storyboard); critical thinking (gathering information, modeling); ability to reflect and revise; and the content skill (aesthetics and criticism). Then students showed their final projects to the class and critiqued each other's work, but I've been assessing them at each step along the way. All of the modules are uploaded online, and the beginning of each module states what competencies or skill I'll be assessing, with a rubric that is standard across the school for different skills. I never give a traditional test; it's graded by the project.

Once students became familiar with how to work through my units, they can independently learn the content with me as a guide, and I can better help students along the learning journey.

COACH PERSPECTIVE: SCAFFOLDING PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS ACROSS THE SCHOOL (MAGGIE WARD)

Next up for the presentations is Melvin. He stands tall and proud. He starts by shaking hands with each panelist while displaying a cheeky grin on his face, knowing that he is impressing the panel. He takes a deep breath, exhales, and then starts barreling through words. He speaks at a normal Spanish cadence, rattling off words like a fast-talking New Yorker. About 50 percent are clear English words, 20 percent are Spanglified words, and the rest are likely words in English pronounced in a creative way that my ear is incapable of discerning.

Through it all, a story emerges. There was a hospital visit, a broken ankle, and a surgery that included a drill. He then shifts gears and starts to pass around a series of pictures that show his invention: drill with a shield. I finally realize that the word I keep hearing is "virus." The guard is to protect against virus during surgery.

This is a prime example of both the beauty and limitations of performance assessment for English language learners. The beauty is that Melvin spoke for five minutes in front of a number of adults and some of his peers and communicated a message in English. His language growth is incredible; in a short time, he has moved from producing words to full sentences.

Watching Melvin speak reminds me of a dinner conversation I had with some Spanish-speaking friends a few weeks prior. The conversation turned to politics and my brain short-circuited. I have strong Spanish comprehension, government vocabulary, and knowledge of politics, but I did not showcase my knowledge because my brain was busy translating. I produced simple sentences like "No, that is a bad idea," and I could use more complex

sentences like compare and contrast or thesis-style statements when modeled by someone else during conversation, but I was unable to produce the formal language on my own. Just as my Spanish limited my ability to showcase my political knowledge, Melvin's English limits his ability to showcase his medical knowledge.

The question that arises from this scenario is: What do we need to shift in our performance assessments and instruction to give us a clearer picture of what is happening in Melvin's head?

The first piece we can modify is the performance task. There are two elements to this: modifying directions for comprehension and providing scaffolds to help the students create the output. As Christine mentioned, modifying the directions includes text chunking, word banks, pictures, and pre-reading strategies. Scaffolding the output using multiple modalities, sentence frames, and organizational scaffolds is often the missing link. In the Spanish politics example, my primary output scaffold was repurposing

sentence structures used by others. If I had a reference sheet of sentence stems, my ability to communicate would have been transformed.

The second way that we lower the language burden of performance assessments is to think in terms of entire units instead of individual assignments, lesson plans, or performance tasks. We use the scaffolding cycle to build entire units to prepare students to engage in performance tasks (see sidebar).

The third manner of addressing this need for scaffolding involves an approach that reaches beyond the individual classroom. It involves creating consistency across classrooms to help students transfer skills from class to class and from one performance assessment to another. While we know that content and vocabulary will change from class to class, language functions needed to describe connections between vocabulary words will not change. The language structures that we need to write essays, give speeches, and engage in debates are the same in science, math, and English.

If we as a staff can leverage those overlapping structures and language functions, we can help our students succeed across classrooms. As a school, we are working toward this goal through weekly interdisciplinary team meetings, school-wide rubrics, peer observations, and walkthroughs. With each conversation, our instruction is more cohesive across classrooms, and our ability to capture the ideas in Melvin's head becomes stronger and stronger.

REFERENCES

Hakuta, K., Y. G. Butler, and D. Witt. 2000. *How Long Does It Take English Language Learners to Attain Proficiency?* Santa Barbara: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute.