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Assessing ELLs in ESL or Mainstream Classrooms: Quick Fixes for Busy Teachers

By Lauren A. Fregeau and Robert D. Leier

lfregeau{at}usouthal.edu and rdl0002{at}auburn.edu

University of South Alabama (Mobile, Alabama), Auburn University (Auburn, Alabama, USA)

Introduction

One result of the Lau vs. Nichols 1974 Supreme Court Decision is that students who do not speak English as their first language must be provided instructional and assessment modifications so they have the opportunity to be academically successful (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2006). NCLB (No Child Left Behind) requires that ELLs receive the same high quality content that mainstream students learn (Gottlieb, 2006). Accomplishing these goals is a challenge for teachers who are typically not prepared in how to accommodate English Language Learners (ELLs) in assessment or instruction.

Many (ELLs) are now mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Increasingly mainstream teachers are faced with teaching students who speak English as their second language along with their native English speaking students. According to NCLB, the teacher is responsible for teaching grade level content to ELLs and for assessing ELLs on content areas. Busy mainstream classroom teachers are often overburdened with many responsibilities that leave them little time to prepare special accommodations for ELLs. Despite this, mainstream teachers are responsible for preparing ELLs to take standardized and teacher-made tests and assessments.

Taking a test can be a very frustrating experience for an English Language Learner. Many ELL students may know the content but are unable to do well on formal examinations designed for native English speakers. This article will provide practical suggestions on how busy mainstream and ESL teachers can accommodate ELLs in assessments in ESL and mainstream classrooms. Simple strategies will be described for modifying existing tests for ELLs, preparing ELLs to take tests and incorporating other forms of assessments to determine student progress. *See [note](#).

Easy Accommodations for Assessing ELLs

ELL students benefit most from having assessment accommodations in English rather than assessment translations in their language. Standardized tests and high school graduation exams are usually given in English. Unless your state makes tests available in the ELL's second language, it is important for ELLs to be practiced and prepared to take these tests in English.

ESL and mainstream teachers can have a difficult time evaluating and assessing the progress of ELL students in their classrooms. Language can be an assessment obstacle, yet there are some simple accommodations busy teachers can employ.

Some general accommodations that fit into both instruction and assessment are:

- allow students who speak the ELL's first language to translate especially in project and lab assessments
- allow the use of electronic word-to-word translators and picture dictionaries
- make use of comprehension supports such as study buddies and cooperative groups

Simple Strategies: Prepare Students to Take Tests

Relax, there is no need to create a special test for your ELLs. A number of adjustments can be made to already-existing assessments, including tests that will help ELLs perform better.

- Go through the test before hand and highlight important key terms and phrases. Literally, use a highlighter, different font, or different colored font to indicate important terms and phrases. This will draw the ELL's attention to those terms or phrases first. Point out to the ELL that they should translate the highlighted terms first as those will give them the key concepts of the test/assessment item.
- Read the test directions aloud to the student as they follow along to assure understanding. Literally, have the students follow with their fingers! This way you are ensured they know how to decode the words. Be alert however, since decoding does not necessarily indicate comprehension of meaning. Have the student demonstrate what they will be doing or check the student to see they actually understood the meaning of the directions.
- Clarify important key words or “confusing” directions. ELLs, especially those who are low-level in reading English, need step by step directions. If directions have multiple steps, give them the directions one step at a time, allowing them to accomplish the first step before telling them the second. Highlighting or pointing out key words in written directions saves time since the ELL may not need to look up every word. Curtin (2005) found that a step by step approach was appropriate for ELLs.
- Share your class notes or lesson plans with the students, allowing them to do a functional translation. It will save you instructional time if ELLs have had time outside of class to look up the vocabulary they do not understand. With this strategy they come into class already knowing the basic content.
- Provide students alternate definitions of commonly used terms that may be confusing. For example use: “gasoline” instead of “gas,” “test” instead of “assessment,” “tissue” instead of “Kleenex,” “rotate” instead of “turn,” and “way to think” or “perspective” instead of “view.”
- Explain test taking vocabulary. ELLs may not know the test-taking meaning of terms such as: explain, name, why?, how?, role of, discuss, think about, compare and contrast, define, describe, briefly, or except. Give them examples from other students from previous tests or from last year's tests.

Simple Strategies: Accommodate Students Taking Tests

Mainstream classroom teachers sometimes do not have much time to make special accommodations for

ELLs on tests. Here are some strategies that require little teacher time:

Give the ELL students more time to complete the test. This is the easiest of all accommodations.

- Allow ELL students to use electronic word-to-word translators during tests.
- Allow students to use picture dictionaries for a vocabulary check. Picture dictionaries have pictures illustrating nouns and verbs. The ELL can look for the picture that corresponds to the thing or action they need a word for and then look at the corresponding numbered terms at the bottom of the page. There are bilingual picture dictionaries, content area picture dictionaries, and picture dictionaries for elementary school students. These are a great tool for both the ELL and the teacher.
- Have the ELL students answer fewer test questions. Depending on the level of proficiency of the ELL, have them answer two thirds, one half, or one third of the questions.
- Read the questions aloud to the student if they need clarification. This is the same concept as reading the directions aloud with the student following along and then doing a sample to demonstrate that they understand the meaning.
- Check periodically as the student takes the test to see if he/she is taking the test correctly. ELLs often come from cultures where the teacher is viewed as the authority in knowledge and pedagogy. To question a teacher is to indicate that a teacher's directions are unclear and that the teacher is not doing a good job of teaching. Thus, students are expected to not ask questions and to say they understand directions even when they do not. Check frequently to see if the ELL did indeed understand the test procedure, vocabulary, and directions.
- Provide “cognates” for important key terms when applicable. When the ELL's first language uses the Roman alphabet, it is often possible to increase their comprehension of written material, including assessments, by using cognates. Cognates are words that “look” more or less the same in the ELL's first language and English and have the same meaning. Examples of cognates for Spanish are: for “talk” use “conversation” (Sp: conversacion), for “test” use “exam” (Sp: examen), for “above average” use “superior” (Sp: superior), for “purpose” use “objective” (Sp: objetivo), for “happen” use “occur” (Sp: ocurrir), for “directions” use “instructions” (Sp: instrucciones)

Simple Strategies: Accommodate Using Existing Tests

Teacher-made tests and assessments can be quickly adjusted to accommodate ELLs. Accommodations can be selected according the English level of the ELL. Here are examples for quick adjustments for multiple choice, matching, short answer, discussion/essay, fill in the blank, and true/false tests:

- **Multiple choice:** eliminate one or more of the choices
- **Discussion and essay:** have ELLs label terms, draw and label diagrams and pictures
- **Matching:** reduce the number of matches required, give an equal number of possibilities in each column, and eliminate “trick” language matches
- **Short-answer:** accept one-word answers and phrases in place of complete sentences
- **True/False:** eliminate or clarify “tricky” language, reduce the number of questions
- **Fill in the blank:** provide two or three options (make the answer multiple choice)

Simple Strategies: Accommodate in Grading Assessments

Accommodations in grading can be time-saving for teachers and stress-reducing for ELLs. There are a number of grading strategies the mainstream teacher can employ in accommodation including:

- Grade only those items completed by the ELL
- Grade only half the number of items that would be completed by the mainstream students
- Accept a picture or a description rather than a specific word as an answer for fill-in the blank
- Count and grade the process rather than only the product (especially in math, science, and language arts projects)
- Grade homework and include it as part of the final assessment grade.
- Grade labs and include them in determining an assessment (science, foreign languages)

Simple Strategies: Incorporate Other Forms of Assessment

Alternative assessments offer the mainstream and ESL teacher a better insight into the ELL's comprehension and language skill development than testing alone. Two such accommodations are:

- Adjust the “weighting” of curricular components (tests, homework, and class work) to reflect student achievement.
- Give vocabulary tests on the course content in place of textbook generated tests

Additional Suggestions for Alternative Assessments Teachers who are able to invest additional time in assessment of ELLs might try some of the following:

Incorporate dialogue journals, especially in English language arts and social studies and for the incorporation of reading and writing language objectives. Dialogue journals are a low-stress, high-interest tool for assessment. Long-term progress is easily assessed since dialogue journals are a permanent and ongoing record of language skills.

Incorporate project assessments, especially in science, math, and social studies, although project assessment can be adapted to all subject areas. Project assessments can easily incorporate the four language domains of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Incorporate oral presentations and demonstrations that offer an alternative for students who are at a higher level in the speaking domain but at a lower level in reading and writing domains.

Incorporate portfolio assessments that will be a source of data for a continuous evaluation of progress (Gonzalez, Yawkey and Minaya-Rowe, 2005).

Incorporate Authentic Assessments (real world challenges) that relate to the life of the students such as letter or journal writing, completing or demonstrating a task from the world outside the classroom (such as an art artifact or report based on researching a topic), or reading or writing an online friendship page (Haley, Marjorie, and Austin, Theresa, 2004; Diaz-Rico, 2008; O'Malley and Pierce, 2004).

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Note

School systems need mainstream classroom and ESL teachers to indicate on progress reports that their ELL students are receiving appropriately accommodated instruction and assessment. Reporting ESL accommodations can be critical to receiving federal funding tied to NCLB. Quality education for ELLs has become a priority for the US Department of Education – especially for the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA, 2007).

Teachers are now required to include in lessons and assessments not only the traditional content objectives but also language objectives if they have ELLs in their classroom. These objectives need to be for four domains: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The ESL teacher, collaborating with the mainstream teacher can help the mainstream classroom teacher to insert language objectives into their lessons and assessments.

Mainstream teachers must know the ELL's proficiency level in order to accommodate ELLs in instruction and assessment. ELLs are usually tested by an ESL teacher using a state or district selected placement assessment. Mainstream teachers should ask for a copy of the test results, specifically the ELL's levels in the four language domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These levels will help the teacher know what accommodations to make for instruction and assessments. Ask the ESL teacher if your state or district has a rubric guide that shows what to expect for each level and language domain.

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