

Performance-Based Assessment: Promoting Achievement for English Language Learners

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Focus on Accountability

In December 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The Act has as its stated purpose the improvement of the educational achievement of economically disadvantaged and minority children, including those who are learning English as an additional language, or English language learners (ELLs). This legislation aims to close the achievement gap between "high- and low-performing children, especially between minority and non-minority students" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). It focuses on ensuring that schools are held accountable for helping all students meet state standards. It also places increasing pressure on schools and districts to include as many students as possible, including ELLs and students with disabilities, in large-scale assessment programs. States are required to report test scores for ELLs as a group and to use test results to improve the educational attainment of these students. By academic year 2005-2006, schools will be held accountable for, at a minimum, annual testing of all children in Grades 3-8 in reading or language arts and mathematics. In the interim, annual testing is to be conducted at various grade ranges, and schools failing to meet improvement goals for two consecutive years beginning in 2003-2004 are to be identified for sanctions, such as replacing teachers and providing students the option of transferring to another school.

Standardized tests used in large-scale assessment programs are supposed to measure a representative sample of knowledge defined by state and local standards and curricula. To some extent, and for some students, these tests may provide evidence of school learning. But for ELLs in U.S. public schools, standardized test results are also likely to reflect limited proficiency in English and a lack

of opportunity to learn the subject matter of the tests (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Calkins, Montgomery, & Santman, 1998; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Kohn, 2000; McKeon, 1994; O'Malley & Pierce, 1994; Stiggins, 2002).

Are current approaches to assessment improving learning for ELLs? How can we help ELLs reach the point where standardized tests can be used as a valid gauge of their achievement? What is the role of classroom-based assessment in preparing ELLs to take standardized tests? This article examines the role of classroom-based assessment, and of performance-based assessment in particular, in promoting learning for ELLs in schools that are increasingly under pressure to prepare these students to pass high-stakes, standardized tests.

Defining the Ultimate Goal of Schooling

Schooling has been described as having at least three goals: *education*, *training*, and *learning* (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). *Education* is the broadest and the hardest to measure, with generalizability or transfer of learning to new situations and tasks being a central characteristic. *Training* refers to a narrow form of learning, "where transfer of learning is measured on tasks that are highly similar to those used in the training" (Amrein & Berliner, p. 10). Examples of training are tasks such as naming the presidents or using a map key. *Learning*, on the other hand, is the process through which students apply knowledge beyond basic facts and procedures. Examples of learning would be writing descriptive paragraphs and engaging in demonstrations, analyses, and justifications.

Education can be defined, then, as the "transfer of learning, that is the application of what is learned in one domain or context to that of another domain or context" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p.10).

Similarly, Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe (1993) propose that, "Although acquiring content knowledge is important, it is perhaps not the most important goal of education. Ultimately, developing mental habits that will enable individuals to learn on their own whatever they want or need to know at any point in their lives is probably the most important goal of education" (p. 3).

Gardner (1999), too, considers mental habits, or thinking and inquiry processes, to be important goals of schooling. He proposes that students learn by probing a small set of examples from the disciplines, rather than by covering a broad range of topics in much less depth, and by discussing and conducting projects, with the ultimate goal being the ability to transfer learning to a wide range of tasks. The mental habits that develop from this type of study should help students develop the skills and abilities needed for life-long learning and for success in life, such as the ability to think and analyze; locate information; work collaboratively on teams; become problem solvers; and perform real-world tasks (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995). Transfer of learning and the development of mental habits that facilitate that transfer, then, are worthy goals of schooling. But what types of assessments are able to capture or promote progress toward these goals?

Classroom-Based Assessments

Research has shown that improved assessment practices at the classroom level can have powerful, beneficial effects on transfer of learning and measures of achievement, including standardized test scores (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2002). In fact, Black &

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William, in a review of over 250 articles, found that improved formative or classroom assessment practices helped low achievers more than other students. This revealing finding has direct implications for NCLB and for school systems that want to close the achievement gap. To make improvements, however, teachers must be provided with the assessment tools they need for increasing the achievement of ELLs.

New understandings of the learning process indicate that assessment and learning are intimately linked. These new understandings of learning need to be applied to classroom-based assessment practices (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993). Among these practices, performance-based assessment appears to hold promise for improving the educational attainment of ELLs.

Using Performance-Based Assessment to Promote Learning

Classroom-based assessments may be of two broad types: selected-response and constructed-response formats. Selected-response formats provide response items for students to choose from (such as multiple-choice, true-false, and matching items). Constructed-response formats, on the other hand, ask students to develop a response, create a product, or conduct a demonstration (Feuer & Fulton, 1993; Frisby, 2001; Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; McTighe & Ferrara, 1998). These types of assessments allow more than one correct answer to a problem and typically involve higher-order thinking skills.

Performance-based assessment (PBA), which uses a constructed-response format, has as its primary purpose the improvement of learning. Performance-based assessment links assessment to instruction through the use of meaningful and engaging tasks. Performance tasks may also call for integration of language and content-area skills.

Authentic assessment, a type of PBA, promotes application of knowledge and skills in situations that closely resemble those of the real world (Frisby, 2001; McTighe & Ferrara, 1998; Wiggins, 1998). Authentic assessments are potentially more motivating than other types because they engage students in realistic uses of language and content-area concepts. Authentic assessment and other types of PBA can be used in the service of education to promote transfer

or generalizability of learning from facts and procedures to applications in meaningful contexts. A large range and number of tasks are needed over time, however, to ensure the generalizability of PBAs.

Can performance-based assessments be used to monitor and support the learning of ELLs? A number of factors make PBAs more appropriate for ELLs than traditional testing formats (Frisby, 2001; Hamayan & Damico, 1991; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Well-constructed performance tasks are more likely than traditional types of assessment to do the following:

- provide comprehensible input to students
- use meaningful, naturalistic context-embedded tasks through hands-on or collaborative activities
- show what students know and can do through a variety of assessment tasks
- support the language and cognitive needs of ELLs
- allow for flexibility in meeting individual needs
- use criterion-referenced assessment for judging student work
- provide feedback to students on strengths and weaknesses
- generate descriptive information that can guide instruction
- provide information for teaching and learning that results in improved student performance

Further, PBAs have the potential to provide in-depth information about a student's ability to integrate knowledge for specific curriculum objectives or standards.

Teachers using PBAs in the classroom have three types to choose from: *products*, *performances*, or *process-oriented assessments*. (McTighe & Ferrara, 1998). *Products* are works produced by students that provide concrete examples of their application of knowledge, for example, writing samples, projects, art or photo exhibits, and portfolios. *Performances* allow students to demonstrate application of their knowledge and skills under the direct observation of the teacher. Students may engage in tasks that are useful outside of school, such as asking for directions by telephone, demonstrat-

ing a process, or arguing a position. All of these can demand high levels of language skill. Examples of performance tasks include oral reports, skits and role-plays, demonstrations, and debates.

Process-oriented assessments provide insight into student thinking, reasoning, and motivation. They can provide diagnostic information on how well students use learning strategies and may lead to independent learning when students are asked to reflect on their learning and set goals to improve it. Some examples of process-oriented assessments are think-alouds, self-assessment checklists or surveys, learning logs, and individual or pair conferences. Products, performances, and process-oriented assessments can all be used to generate rich information on ELLs' ability to transfer learning and meet state and local standards.

Two features of performance-based assessment help support the development of mental habits that lead to independent learning. The first is referred to as *visible criteria*. A fundamental tenet of performance-based assessment is the sharing of standards and making the criteria for evaluation visible to students. Teachers share their expectations for student work and performance in as explicit terms as possible, using a scoring rubric, checklist, or other assessment tool and representative samples of student work. This approach is especially important with ELLs, who have been shown to benefit from the teacher's sharing of the assessment criteria in advance of the assessment itself (Kolls, 1992). When teachers state expectations for learning in terms of specific outcomes—in language the students can understand—and show them examples of excellent work, the likelihood of students attaining the criteria is greatly increased (McTighe & Ferrara, 1998; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996; Stiggins, 2002).

The second key element of performance-based assessment is *self-assessment*, which is essential for teaching students how to manage their study habits, use learning strategies, and reflect on progress toward learning goals. The goal of self-assessment is to produce students who can learn independently of the teacher and become lifelong learners. To accomplish this, teachers need to provide students with specific feedback, opportunities to give and receive

feedback from peers, and time to set learning goals. Self-assessment also plays a role in motivating learners to continue learning and building self-confidence in their ability to learn.

Performance-based assessments that are designed for the language proficiency level of ELLs, that call for transfer of learning through meaningful tasks, that make criteria for evaluation visible to students, and that show ELLs how to monitor their own work can also support learning for these students.

Becoming Assessment Literate

Most assessments used in the classroom are developed by teachers, and these assessments of student work have more influence on instructional decisions than state-mandated tests (Frisby, 2001; Wiggins, 1998). Yet very few teachers have access to the type of assessment information that will enable them to assess ELLs accurately and fairly. Indeed, the vast majority of teachers report that they feel unprepared to assess and teach ELLs (Fradd & Lee, 2001).

Only about a dozen states require teacher candidates to show competence in assessment in order to get a teaching license, and the majority of teacher preparation programs fail to provide instruction in developing assessments that support student learning (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Stiggins, 2002). Most teachers use the same types of tests that were used when they were in school, typically traditional multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, and true/false tests. In fact, little has changed in classroom-based assessment for at least the past 50 years (Bertrand, 1994).

To be able to use improved classroom-based assessment practices such as performance-based assessments, teachers must have access to professional development opportunities that will help them learn to design and use assessments that can improve the achievement of ELLs. Mere exposure to learning or assessment theories or examples of innovative assessments will not be enough, and neither will one-shot workshops. The kind of professional development that is needed is of a long-term, collaborative nature that helps teachers try out their assessments and get feedback from colleagues, program administrators, and university faculty experienced in using assessments for learning. School study teams and

assessment focus groups can lead assessment changes in each school system. Teachers need to find their voices and become active in shaping their own professional development in order to improve learning for ELLs.

Conclusion

Teachers of ELLs work in school environments that are increasingly under pressure to prepare these students to pass standardized tests for accountability purposes. Closing the achievement gap between language minority and non-minority students will also require improved assessments that research shows can promote and support learning at the classroom level. While standardized tests may be appropriate for determining whether or not students have met state and local standards, we need other forms of assessment to inform instructional decisions made on a day-to-day basis, diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses related to classroom instruction, and provide specific feedback to students that supports their learning. For this purpose, we need classroom-based assessments that reflect instructional activities and learning standards, make clear achievement targets, and help teachers redirect instruction to promote learning. Although not a panacea, performance-based assessments can promote increased achievement for ELLs by increasing confidence in their ability to learn and motivation to continue learning. If we are going to be successful in closing the achievement gap, we will need to find new ways to support student learning and make improved assessment practices available to teachers of ELLs. These children deserve no less.

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