Week 2

**Chapter Seven – Assessing English Language Learners / Chapter Nine – Identifying Language Acquisition Levels**

The second part of Discussion 1 touches on K-12 ELL assessments in both ESL and mainstream classroom contexts. In the final chapters of our reading this week, you will get a better understanding of the purposes and legal requirements for these assessments, as well as how often assessments are given and how the resulting reports can be used.

One important element in developing appropriate assessments for ELLs is an understanding of standards. Syrja (2011) advises that you “[f]amiliarize yourself with your state’s English language proficiency standards for your grade level,” and if “your state does not have well-written ELP standards, then consider using other resources, such as WIDA standards or Can Do descriptors” (p. 20). A Google search should quickly lead you information about your state’s standards and/or the WIDA Web site. An example of the WIDA Can Do descriptors can be accessed through the following link: <http://wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/index.aspx>

In closing this week's Guidance, I’d like to again emphasize that being able to recognize ***who*** the ELLs in our classrooms are and ***where*** those ELLs are in the process of acquiring English is crucial to developing proper assessments and choosing curriculum that meets ELLs' needs for academic and language development. Indeed, deJong & Harper (2005) noted that teachers “need to understand basic characteristics of second language development” in order to not “overlook the impact of differences between L1 [first-language] and L2 [second-language] learning on effective oral language and literacy development and academic achievement for ELLs.”  (Click the following link to read more of this article, *Preparing Mainstream Teachers for English-Language Learners: Is Being a Good Teacher Good Enough?*:
[www.teqjournal.org/backvols/2005/32\_2/13dejong&harper.pdf](http://www.teqjournal.org/backvols/2005/32_2/13dejong%26harper.pdf)

Chapter 4

How children Acquire Language

 Although language acquisition follows a predictable pattern of stages, what is not predictable is the amount of time that each of those stages may take. Much research has been done to try to identify the conditions or characteristic that influence the rate of acquisition, and what has become clear is that the speed of language acquisition stems from factors that are both within the child and in the child’s learning environment. Specifically, the child’s aptitude for languages, interest and motivation, and personality interact with the quantity and quality of language inputs and opportunities for use to influence the rate of language acquisition and eventual fluency levels.

 McLaughlin has distinguished simultaneous and sequential acquisition of language. Simultaneous acquisition can be seen in young children, typically before the age of three, who seem to follow similar developmental pathways to learning a second language, as do children who learn just one language. Clearly, this facility is why the majority of young children in the world who acquire two or more languages do so within the first few years of life. The implication is that the exposure of children to learning multiple languages should happen as early in life as possible.

 After the first three years of life, children who acquire a second language do so sequentially. They follow a different progression and pathway from that followed by monolingual children, and the progression is highly affected by the characteristics of the language learner as well as the characteristics of the language-learning environment.

 By the time these children begin learning the second language, they have already learned the basics of their first language. They are familiar with and understand the structure of their primary language and must now learn the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax that are unique to the second language. The majority of the debate among linguists and researchers is driven by their beliefs of how best to teach these structures. Although we will not go deeply into these debates, we will explore different strategies that have at their core some of these beliefs.

 Tabors and Snow have posited that sequential second-language, acquisition is a developmental sequence that follows four distinct stages (these should not to be confused with language acquisition levels);

1. The home language stage. The child holds on to primary language, insisting instead that others learn to understand him or her. When ELLs who have become competent in their first language are out into an English-dominant setting such as a mainstream classroom, they continue to speak their home language to other children even when these others do not understand them. Although this first stage typically lasts a few days or weeks, sometimes a child continues this stage for months.
2. Nonverbal period. Children realize that they cannot communicate in this setting using their home language. They move into a silent period and rarely speak, perhaps using nonverbal means to communicate. Although it may seem little is happening, this is actually an active language learning stage for ELLs. Hey are listening in great detail and learning the features, sounds, and words of the second language, although they are not using it to communicate. Again, depending on the child, this stage may be very brief (days to weeks) or can last for months. This is an extremely important stage in the progression of learning a second language. Although second language learners may need to be assessed, and thus result in misleading information.
3. Telegraphic and formulaic speech. The second language learner begins to produce only two words, such as “want eat” indicating that the child would like something to eat. This is similar to the type of language structure that monolingual children experience when they are in the initial stages of language production. Formulaic speech refers syllables of words strung together or combined chunk of words that reflect words the child has heard. Tabors provides an example from one of the preschools she studied in which children used the phrase “lookit” to get other student’s attention or get them to play. ELLs develop these phrases in an attempt to help them build social goals.
4. Productive language. Students begin to create their own phrases that reflect their thoughts and desires. At the start of this stage, they may use a very simple pattern of noun, verb, noun; for example “I need pencil.” Their use of language becomes more sophisticated over time as they gain control over the structured patterns, and vocabulary of the new language. Overt corrections should not be made, just as they wouldn’t be made for a monolingual child learning to speak. Repetition of the correct phrase provides models of the language that they can mimic: “You need a pencil. Okay, here you go”.

Language acquisition is a developmental process, and thus these stages are flexible and not mutually exclusive. McLaughlin, Blanchard, and Osanai accurately portrayed the process as acting more like the actions of waves, “moving in and out, generally moving one direction, but receding, the moving forward again).

Often ELLs mix languages (known as language mixing) or switch back and forth between words (known as code switching) in the two languages. Parents and teachers alike may be concerned that this is evidence of confusion on the child’s part. In fact, this is a natural part of learning a second language. A student who is trying to relay a message or make known her needs may find that she lacks sufficient vocabulary. In an effort to communicate her message, she may rely on vocabulary form her native language that she may not yet be familiar with in the second language. Research has confirmed that language mixing is present even among adult bilinguals as they try to make a special emphasis or establish their cultural identity.

These demographic trends point to the great diversity within the ELL population. English language learners vary in the home language they speak, the age at which they arrive in the United States, the age at which they were first exposed to English, their fluency rates in both primary language and English, their years of schooling in their native country, and their family’s socioeconomic status. What all these variances point to is that there is no one-size-fits-all response to addressing the many needs of this increasingly diverse population. Instead, we must clearly and accurately define our population and the characteristic that make them unique. Armed with that information, we are much better prepared to address their educational challenges.

Chapter Seven

*Assessing English Language Learners*

One of the most complex issues surrounding English language learners lies in the question how to accurately assess their progress. What lends to the complexity is the fact that there are so many different purposes for assessing these learners: classification, program placement, monitoring of academic progress, and reclassification, for example. Our first task, then, is to determine the purpose for assessment in order to design an assessment measure that matches our purpose and yields the information we are looking for.

Formative and Summative Assessments

The purpose for assessing academic progress can be formative or summative. *Formative assessments* take place while the learning is happening and thus provide valuable diagnostic information that guides the selection of instructional strategies and the instruction itself. Any assessment of language proficiency should be considered formative in nature since students are in the process of acquiring the English language for at least seven years. *Summative assessments* provide the final confirmation that a student has mastered the content and is ready to move to the next unit of study.

Regardless of whether the assessment is formative or summative, the bottom line is that all teachers from all content areas need to be able to determine what English learners know or not know regardless of their language proficiency levels. This presents some obvious challenges, particularly for mainstream content teachers who may not know how to differentiate their assessments so that even an English learner at the beginning levels of language acquisition can demonstrate his or her understanding of the content.

In the early elementary grades and beginning levels of language acquisition, when many students lack reading and writing skills, teachers need to depend on performance-based assessments to be able to assess a student’s understanding of a concept or skill accurately.

The Assessment Process

Clearly identifying the purpose of an assessment will help drive the type of assessment to use. The first assessment of ELLs is conducted in order to determine initial classification and program placement.

Monitoring Language Acquisition

Once the student’s initial language acquisition level has been identified, the ESL teacher is responsible for monitoring his or her language proficiency. Particularly in the early stages of language development, the student will rapidly progress through the initial stages of preproduction (up to six months to one year). This rapid progression mostly involves social language, that is, basic interpersonal communication skills (BLCS).

Complexities of Monitoring Language Acquisition

Many experts in the field of teaching English to English language learners have failed to shed light on one particular complexity: using the results of language proficiency assessments to plan instruction. Throughout the remainder of this book, I reinforce the importance of sharing this with all teachers of English learners, because of its significance to the process of language development.

Assessment in the ESL Classroom

According to Title III of the no child Left Behind Act, states are required to conduct an annual standards-based assessment of English language proficiency for each ELL. This is the same assessment that is administered to determine an initial language acquisition level. While most schools use the results of this assessment to make an initial placement, they also use it to place students in the appropriate classroom.

In addition to this annual assessment, ESL teachers should conduct their own progress monitoring of each ELL’s language proficiency levels on an ongoing basis. The purpose of this assessment is to provide both ELS and mainstream classroom teachers with accurate information about a student’s language proficiency levels so that they can plan appropriate instruction that will help the student reach the next level of language acquisition.

Assessment in the Mainstream Classroom

Often mainstream teachers feel out of the loop when it comes to educating ELLs. In fact, in the past, ESL teachers often failed to inform the mainstream teachers about the levels of their ELLs. As we have just seen, it is imperative that mainstream teachers provide with language proficiency assessment data that includes overall levels as well as domain-specific levels for each English learner they teach. Some schools develop a student information sheet that is updated periodically to reflect the most current information available on the language acquisition levels of English learners. The English Learner Profile Sheet, such as the example in Part Two Resources section, should be filled out and distributed to all ESL and mainstream teacher. In order for ELLs to make appropriate academic gains as well as gains in language acquisition, mainstream teachers need to provide appropriately leveled instruction and assessments.

English language acquisition levels can be used in conjunction with a state’s English proficiency standards or World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) standards to help plan appropriate performance-based assessments. (WIDA is a consortium of twenty-four partner states that developed set of consistent language proficiency standards and assessments.) The results of these assessments can help mainstream teachers determine whether an ELL has mastered the content. It is especially significant to note in this example that the content has or has not been watered down from level 5 to level 1.

The differentiated assessment task reflect the WIDA writing and speaking descriptors for each level of language proficiency. If we look at the task for a level 1 student, we should feel confident that given the differentiation provided, the teacher would be able to determine whether this student is proficient on this science standard. Level 1 students are expected to accomplish the same assessment task as the students in the other level; however, they are provided with scaffolds that allow them to demonstrate proficiency with limited English skills.

Chapter 9

Identifying Language Acquisition Levels

 Title III of the No Child Left Behind Act, requires states to assess the language acquisition levels of ELLs annually. Certainly ESL teachers welcome data from these assessments, but they are also frustrated by the fact they do not receive the results in a timely manner. In fact, most teachers do not receive test reports until sometime between November and January. By then, a third of the school year has passed.

 So how can students be placed in an appropriately leveled ESL class at the start of the year?

Creating Language Proficiency Assessments

In the elementary grades in school with an ESL pull-out, in which students are pulled out of the regular classroom to receive daily ESL instruction, or push-in program, in which the ELS teacher into the regular classroom to provide ESL instruction within the context of a regular school day, typically the ELS teacher has previous experience with the students and can make an educated guess as to the appropriate placement. In some elementary schools, teachers teach ESL at the same time during the school day, which allows them to regroup their ELLs for leveled ESL instruction. In this case, teachers may turn to the pervious grade level for information for grouping ELLs.

By middle and high school, ELLs usually have a class period devoted to ESL instruction. If the ELS department works collaboratively, they may be able to share some initial information pertaining to English language levels.

Many schools and districts have moved toward creating their own English language acquisition assessments in order to be able to monitor the progress that students are making in each of the four domains of speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Most of these assessments are observational protocols or performance-based assessments in which the teacher closely monitors the progress students are making. Due to the fact that most state English language proficiency standards are written in grade spans (k-2, 3-5,6-8, and 9-12), these protocols include the language proficiency standards for each domain and follow students through that grad span. In the language proficiency assessment, teachers use their professional judgment to determine a student’s ongoing proficiency level in each of the domains and provide a signature confirming that the student has met the criteria for each level of proficiency and domain.

Using Assessment Results

Schools or districts that do not have a locally developed English language acquisition assessment should use the results from the state English language proficiency assessment.

Using the Part Two Resources section, particularly the English Learner Profile Sheet, the ELS teacher or English language coordinator can keep all mainstream teachers informed as to levels of their English learners. Keep in mind that some teachers may not know which students in their classes are ELLs. This is particularly common in middle and high school, where content-area teachers may see more than ninety students a day.

ESL teachers should closely monitor their Ells’ progress and either modify their instruction accordingly or place them in a different level ESL class if they believe that the student has been misplaced. Although the master schedule typically drives instruction at the middle and high school levels, close consideration must be given to whether that schedule takes precedence over providing instruction to ELLs that helps, propel them to the next levels of language acquisition and helps them avoid becoming long-term English learners.