Editor’s Note: The Common Core State Standards are placing new demands on English-language learners. In this Spotlight take a look at how schools are making the standards accessible to ELLs, understand how the common core may help establish uniform definitions for ELLs, and see how teachers are preparing for instruction and assessment challenges.

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Building Bridges for ELLs

A New Mexico school focuses on making standards accessible to everyone—including English-learners

By Lesli A. Maxwell
Albuquerque, N.M.

In Yolanda Medrano’s class here at Emerson Elementary School, hands shoot into the air to answer questions she is asking about women and professional baseball.

These 4th grade students—most of them still learning English—have just finished reading and listening to a story about Jackie Mitchell, a 17-year-old girl who struck out baseball legends Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig when she pitched in an exhibition game against the New York Yankees in 1931.

Noting one expression in the story, Ms. Medrano asks the students to tell her what “throws like a girl” means.

“It means you don’t throw good,” a boy answers.

“It means that no one thought she should play with
The key lesson from her to our staff was that ELLs have to have access to grade-level, complex text. That is revolutionary.”

LYNN ROSEN
Director of Language and Cultural Equity, Albuquerque Public Schools

...
cadre of teachers—brought together by the Albuquerque Teachers Federation, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers—began meeting a year ago to study the common-core English/language arts standards and craft model lessons based on grade-level-complex texts. Through the local union, the teachers are providing professional development to any colleagues looking for help with selecting texts, planning lessons, and providing supports to English-learners. The teachers’ model lessons will also be videotaped and posted on the bilingual Colorin Colorado website as a free resource.

The initiative—which paired the teachers with Diane August, a language-acquisition researcher and former teacher of English-learners—is supported by the AFT’s Innovation Fund.

Some teachers involved in the project say they were stunned to discover that much of the text they had been using in the district’s English/language arts curriculum, for example, was not just below grade level, but far below.

“I was stupefied,” said Maria Padilla-Enyart, a middle school English/language arts teacher who is part of the cadre. “I had been teaching 4th-grade-level text to 7th graders who were in general education. And what about my ELLs? They were getting an even more watered-down version.”

Norma Lujan-Quiñones and Loyola Garcia, 1st grade teachers who are also part of the common core/ELL group, said the same was true in the lower grades, with reading content too often presented in pictures rather than words.

“It’s an injustice to these students,” Ms. Garcia said. “Those days of watering down material for them have to be gone if they are going to succeed with the common core.”

Adapting ‘Little Red Hen’

Ms. Lujan-Quiñones recently presented a lesson she developed on “The Little Red Hen” folktale to about two dozen teacher colleagues from around Albuquerque. A more condensed version of the story is in the district’s 1st grade basal reader, but she built her lesson around a longer, more language-rich version, which forced her to think more carefully about the supports she needs to give the 10 English-learners in her class of 18 students. She says she may spend as much as two weeks on the story. In the past, it might have been just two days. On the first page of the story, the writer uses “sleep,” “nap,” and “snooze,” words with similar meanings, but only one of which—“sleep”—might be familiar to her ELLs. In her lesson, Ms. Lujan-Quiñones will point out “sleep” and ask her students to tell her if they read or heard another word with the same meaning. She’ll ask them to act out “sleep,” “nap,” and “snooze,” as she says the words aloud.

“For me, as their teacher, I have to spend much more time reading and thinking about the text myself before asking them to tackle it,” she said. “And it’s not enough just to read it to them or read it with them, we’ve got to break it down and have discussions.”

Preparations for All

Back at Emerson, the team emphasizes how nascent their efforts are—not only in figuring how best to teach the new standards to ELLs, but also in establishing a strong school culture, with involved parents and strong community partners. They are less than three months into what they hope will be a transformation of the school and a model for the city.

But Clint “Teo” McDougal, a 4th grade dual-language teacher before he was tapped last spring to be the school’s new assistant principal, sees signs of promise.

“I did a classroom observation in 5th grade and watched these small groups of English-learners reading and discussing a science text on the Albuquerque aquifer,” Mr. McDougal said. “First, just seeing these kids work with a complex science text is a huge shift, and seeing them persevere with it shows me that our teachers are creating the conditions students need to stick with something until they understand.”

But educators here are also concerned about how they can make sure that all teachers across the district will be prepared to change their practices and provide the intense supports that English-learners need. One of the next major common-core-related initiatives in Albuquerque involves intensive professional development for principals on the needs of English-learners. In addition, the district is getting ready to release an adaptation of its common-core English/language arts units of study for dual-language teachers who also teach Spanish/language arts.

“We do worry about the children who could be left behind by this,” said Ms. Rosen. “But then you have to turn that worry into figuring out how we make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Coverage of “deeper learning” that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.

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NORMA LUJAN-QUIÑONES
1st Grade Teacher, Emerson Elementary School, Albuquerque, N.M.
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Pull Under Way to Standardize ELL Definitions

By Lesli A. Maxwell

The many ways of identifying which students are English-learners and when they reach proficiency in the language could meld into a more uniform process as a result of the move to common standards and assessments, a profound shift that could drive changes in instruction and provision of resources, experts say.

As two big groups of states work to design shared assessments for the new standards, they are laboring to establish shared definitions of what it means to be an English-language learner and when those students no longer need language instruction. That would represent a massive change from current practice, which finds districts and states using unique definitions for ELLs and widely varying criteria for reclassifying them as fluent.

Getting states to agree on such a complex and often politicized issue will require a deliberate, multiyear process, state policy officials and ELL experts say.

Among the advantages of doing so, they say: true comparability among states for how well they are teaching English-learners and more confidence that ELLs are served equitably by public schools, regardless of where they live.

In California, where more than 1,000 school districts can make their own rules for deciding when an English-learner has reached proficiency in the language, a student who meets one district’s criteria can easily fall short in another.

The same is true between states when it comes to identifying English-learners. A student flagged for English-language-acquisition services in Texas, for example, may not be judged the same way in Arizona.

“Before common core, this would have been virtually impossible because of the variation among content standards in the states,” said Robert Linquanti, a senior research associate at WestEd, a San Francisco-based research group, referring to the Common Core State Standards that have been adopted by all but four states. “But because of the shared alignment, there is now a reasonable shot at doing this.”

State Pushback?

Mr. Linquanti and H. Gary Cook, an associate research scientist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, are finalizing a set of recommendations to states about how to proceed toward developing a common definition of English-learners. They presented their initial recommendations to state education officials earlier this month in Atlanta.

One national education analyst said she wouldn’t rule out pushback from states, which might see such a move as further erosion of their authority over education policy.

“While a common definition may be very logical and make perfect sense, and states may choose to come around, I think the risks continue to ratchet up that people are going to say, ‘Enough. This is our business,’” said Kathy Christie, a vice president at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

The U.S. Department of Education is a main driver behind the momentum toward defining English-learners in a common way.

Under its requirements for states in either of the common-assessment groups being funded through federal Race to the Top money—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC—participants must agree to a uniform definition of an English-learner.

That requirement is the same for the states that also are part of either of the two federally funded groups developing new English-language proficiency exams to measure ELLs’ progress toward meeting the language demands in the common standards. Those two consortia are Assessment Services Supporting ELs through Technology Systems, or ASSETS, and English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century, or ELPA 21.

The new common assessments will roll out in the 2014-15 school year, with the new English-language-proficiency tests expected to debut in 2015-16.

Timetable for Rollouts

Though membership in the four testing consortia remains in flux, many states belong to at least one of the Race to the Top-funded consortia and one of the groups creating the new English-language-proficiency tests.

To help the states work together on this issue across all four testing groups, the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers last year convened an ELL assessment task force to make recommendations. That task force is composed of members of all four testing consortia, as well as experts on the assessment of special education students.

“The more that things can be standardized across the consortia, the better and easier it will be for states to implement the assessments,” said Scott Norton, the director of standards, assessment, and accountability for the CCSSO. “And as students move around and between states, having a common understanding of who they are and how well they are doing is really important.”

Having a shared definition of English-learners is also an important component to the work that Smarter Balanced and PARCC test designers are doing to decide what types of testing accommodations ELLs should get. This is another politically difficult task because of the differences among states on the current supports that are allowed for English-learners taking standardized tests.

Mr. Norton, however, cautioned that reaching consensus will be complicated. Each state has its own political and policy environment to consider, and policies and practices around English-learners may be deeply ingrained.

“Even assuming that everyone wants to agree on this, it’s not going to be a simple matter,” Mr. Norton said.

Crazy-Quilt Approach

With such a crazy-quilt policy and practice approach to English-learners, comparability
between states and even districts is a major challenge.

For example, the English-language-proficiency test currently given in California gives an even weight in scoring the four tested domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, at 25 percent each. In the numerous states that use the assessment developed by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment, or WIDA, proficiency is more heavily weighted toward students’ literacy performance in the reading and writing domains. In Texas, for example, how an ELL performs on the reading domain is the largest determining factor for judging proficiency.

“If you take a look at the national collection of data now and try to say something about ELLs across the country, you really can’t,” said Mr. Cook, the University of Wisconsin-Madison researcher. “There is difficulty even trying to understand what an English-language learner is at that level.”

The lack of uniformity also leads to a distribution of federal Title III funds—aid that helps pay for instructional programs for ELLs—that many states and districts say doesn’t match the actual number of English-learners they are serving in their schools.

Because of the wide variation in how ELLs are defined and classified, the federal Education Department uses census data rather than state-reported counts of enrolled ELLs to determine levels of Title III aid. California, for example, gets funding for the roughly 1 million English-learners who are captured by census data collected through the American Community Survey, rather than the 1.4 million actually enrolled in its public schools, said Mr. Linquanti.

**Key Issues**

To move toward a common definition, Mr. Linquanti and Mr. Cook say, states will have to wrestle with four key issues.

The first is identifying the pool of potential English-learners, which is done by school districts through the use of home-language surveys. Even though such surveys are widely used, the types of questions they ask and the results they yield vary dramatically.

The second is establishing similar criteria for confirming, or ruling out, that a potential English-learner actually needs services and establishing the level of support that a student needs.

The third is defining, in a common way, what it means to be English-proficient.

The fourth is agreeing to consistent criteria in deciding if a student is no longer an ELL.

“We can’t have criteria for reclassification all over the map,” Mr. Linquanti said.

“There are places where a kid can be kept as an ELL based on a single grade that has nothing to do with his or her language proficiency.”

Both Mr. Linquanti and Mr. Cook said that teachers and other educators who are close to the students should still be able to weigh in on the readiness of an English-learner to exit from language-acquisition services, but that having clear and common criteria, a checklist of sorts, would lead to more consistency in reclassification.

“It’s figuring out where the sweet spot is,” Mr. Cook said.

Another advantage to making English-learner policy more consistent across states is that it would create a bigger demand for high-quality instructional materials for ELLs, said Kenji Hakuta, an education professor at Stanford University who co-directs the Understanding Language effort that is developing free, open-source common-core materials for educators who work with English-learners.

“This would also motivate publishers and service providers to take advantage of a critical mass market and develop better and differentiated materials for the diversity of [English-language learners],” said Mr. Hakuta, who also coordinates a CCSSO group on assessment of ELLs and enlisted Mr. Linquanti and Mr. Cook to write recommendations for states.

And, Mr. Hakuta said, as concerns persist over the needs of certain types of English-learners, particularly those long-term ELLs who have been receiving services for six or more years with little progress toward reaching proficiency, consistency will help lead to “better differentiation of instruction for different levels of kids.”

**“The more that things can be standardized across the consortia, the better and easier it will be for states to implement the assessments. And as students move around and between states, having a common understanding of who they are and how well they are doing is really important.”**

SCOTT NORTON
Director, Standards, Assessment, and Accountability, CCSSO
Model Common-Core Unit Piloted for ELL Teachers

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Seventh and 8th grade English-learners in selected urban schools will soon dive into some of the most celebrated speeches in U.S. history. They’ll dissect, for example, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” and Robert F. Kennedy’s “On the Death of Martin Luther King.”

Though their English-language skills are still developing, the students will read the original texts, not watered-down versions.

This brand-new English/language arts unit on the use of persuasion was designed to show how reading complex, informational texts and writing arguments—a key requirement in the new common-core standards—can be used with English-learners to deepen their learning of content and concepts as well as language.

Called “Persuasion Across Time and Space,” the five-lesson unit is the first major classroom resource produced by the Understanding Language team, a group of English-language-learner experts led by Kenji Hakuta, an education professor at Stanford University, to help educators grasp the central role of language in the rigorous Common Core State Standards and to give teachers resources for providing higher levels of instruction and demanding content to ELL students.

The efforts are underwritten by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (Carnegie and Gates help support coverage of business and innovation in Education Week.)

The unit—to be piloted in the coming weeks in classrooms in Charlotte, N.C.; Chicago; and Denver—is meant for middle school students with at least an intermediate level of English-language proficiency. It’s designed for 7th and 8th grade classes with a mix of native speakers and English-learners, or just ELLs. A small number of teachers in New York City and Oakland, Calif., tested the unit with English-learners in summer school last year.

‘A Potent Lesson’

“This is a good, potent lesson that can be scaffolded in diverse degrees of intensity, depending on the level of support needed for the English-learner,” said Aída Walqui, a member of the Understanding Language team and a main author of the unit. “This unit shows...
students what they are capable of intellectually, and that they can deepen their conceptual [skills], academic skills, and their communication skills at the same time.”

Ms. Walqui, the director of teacher professional development for WestEd, a San Francisco-based research group, said targeting the team’s first common-core instructional unit to middle school made sense because both elementary and high school teachers “can see themselves” in how a unit like this could work in their classrooms.

More importantly, Ms. Walqui said, the middle school years are a critical transition period for ELLs. “It’s in this period that the types of texts really start to perceptibly shift” to more complex readings, she said. The team designed a unit around persuasion, in part, to counter misconceptions that persuasive writing appeals only to the emotions, Ms. Walqui said.

“Persuasion begins with an argument that appeals first to intellect,” she said. “For students who are beginning to grapple with issues of justice in the world, persuasion would be the perfect anchor for them as they start to see an actual role for themselves in society.”

Students will be exposed to divergent perspectives. They will read “The Civil Rights Movement: Fraud, Sham and Hoax,” a speech delivered in 1964 by Alabama Gov. George Wallace, and a speech on race relations written and delivered by Barbara Jordan, the late congresswoman from Houston.

George Bunch, an education professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who advised Ms. Walqui and her co-authors in their efforts, said teaching the unit requires fundamental instructional shifts for ELL teachers. One critical one, he said, is that the unit has an “explicit focus on language” at the same time students are engaged with complex texts.

Broken into five lessons, the unit’s texts and multimedia materials start with familiar content—television advertising—and move into less familiar works, such as the Barbara Jordan speech. Each lesson includes activities to draw students into the material. It outlines levels of supports teachers may use to bridge linguistic, cultural, and historical gaps for students who are learning English.

Central to the unit is the second lesson, which features Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. It starts with interactive activities, such as discussions of photos from the era, to build students’ background knowledge about Lincoln, the Civil War, and the battle fought at Gettysburg, Pa., before they read the 267-word speech. The power of that lesson is that it gives students a fighting chance to understand the speech without taking away their opportunity to engage with the text through close reading,” said Mr. Bunch.

In the fifth and final lesson, students view a 1992 speech written and delivered to the United Nations by Severn Suzuki, an 11-year-old Canadian girl. It’s meant to inspire them to write and deliver their own persuasive texts, Ms. Walqui said.

Susan Pimentel, a lead author of the English/language arts common standards—which 46 states have adopted—and a member of the Understanding Language team, said the persuasion unit is especially strong in its “range and quality of text.” During a webinar on the unit last month, she called it a “model in what the common core means” by selecting text that is connected by purpose and topic.

Charlotte, Chicago, and Denver were named as pilot sites, in part, because they are in different parts of the country and serve a broad cross section of ELL students, said Martha Castellón, the teams’ executive director.

The team will provide professional development to teachers, and then monitor implementation and collect feedback to hone the lessons. The results will inform forthcoming efforts to develop instructional resources in math and science, as well as in English/language arts, for use by educators nationwide.

Coverage of “deeper learning” that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.
activities using language.

“Vocabulary and grammar are still important, but at a lower level of importance,” she added. “That's going to be a momentous change.”

This work will no longer be just the province of English-as-a-second-language teachers. The common core demands that teachers across all content areas teach literacy skills and the so-called “academic language” that is at the heart of their area of expertise.

As some states and districts—such as the Miami-Dade County school system in Florida, where 58,000 students are English-learners—push ahead on an early timeline with turning the standards into actual classroom instruction, language scholars, policymakers, advocates, and educators around the country continue to wrestle with important questions about how the language needs of English-learners will be met under the more-rigorous standards. A number of small- and large-scale efforts are taking shape to develop tools, resources, and instructional supports to help ensure that English-learners—the fastest-growing subgroup of students in the nation—will have the same access to the rigorous instructional levels of the common core as their peers who are native English speakers.

‘Academic’ vs. ‘Everyday’

Helping English-learners surmount the higher expectations of the common standards will depend largely on how well teachers get them to understand academic language, in contrast to the informal, everyday English they use outside the classroom.

One of the most far-reaching efforts under way to help teachers in that vein is a project led by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment consortium, a group of 27 states that currently share a common set of English-language-proficiency standards. Using broad input from member states, language experts at WIDA are working to finalize a new edition of the consortium’s five English-language-development standards that will show clearly the connections between the content standards of the common core across every grade level and the academic language that will be necessary to teach across the varying levels of English proficiency.

For example, in 1st grade, the common core calls for pupils to “write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.” The WIDA edition clearly spells out the grade-level vocabulary words and expressions that teachers should use—such as fact, paragraph, topic sentence, main idea, detail—while teaching that writing standard to students at all levels of English development. The WIDA edition also offers example topics that are pulled directly from a content standard in the common core and provide teachers with the types of support and scaffolding of academic language that they need depending on students’ proficiency.

The new edition is also more explicit in showing teachers the cognitive demands required of the core-content standards and how to adjust instruction in line with English proficiency.

“I am hoping that teachers can see how to differentiate their instruction, so that even if you are a level-one English-learner, your teacher is going to have the tools to help you access the content even though you don’t have much English,” said Margo Gottlieb, WIDA’s lead developer of common assessments for English-learners.

The final version of WIDA’s English-language-development standards should be published by June, and, starting in late summer, the group will hold four regional conferences around the country to provide training to teachers and school administrators on the new edition and its connections to the common standards.

WIDA is also leading the effort of a group of 28 states to design new assessments of English-language proficiency that will measure the language demands of the common standards.

Readying Exemplars

Another major initiative unfolding to craft an array of free instructional resources for teachers of English-learners is centered at Stanford University, where Kenji Hakuta, an education professor and an expert on English-learners, is co-chairing a project with María Santos, a former director of English-learner programs for the New York City school system, that will map out the English-language demands of the common standards. Ms. Walqui of WestEd is also on that team of experts.

Earlier this month, the team launched its Understanding Language website with a dozen papers related to the common core and ELLs, along with a collection of practice and policy briefs that will address key issues.

The project is well-funded, with separate, $1 million grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (Both foundations also support some areas of coverage in Education Week.)

Ms. Walqui said the group is hard at work devising “exemplars” to demonstrate to teachers what planning a unit for ELLs under the common core would look like. The first exemplar, she said, is scheduled to come out in June and will focus on middle school English/language arts, because “it’s a critical transition point for English-learners.”

The key for lesson planning is that the goals for students must be the same, Ms. Walqui said, but that there are multiple pathways for students of varying developmental levels of English to achieve the goals.

“The differentiation is within the activities or versions of the activities for students,” she said.

As the team publishes its exemplars, it will host webinars to train teachers, Ms. Walqui said.

The Council of the Great City Schools— which represents 67 urban school systems that are home to 30 percent of the nation’s English-learners—is involved in a multitude of initiatives to help its member districts implement the common standards as thoughtfully and carefully for ELLs as they do for students who are not learning English. The rigor of the common core is also providing a prime opportunity for some districts to improve their services for English-learners, said Gabriela Uro, the manager of English-language-learner policy and research for the Washington-based council.

“The English-language-learner programs in many of our districts need ramping up anyway, and now they understand that if you are going to improve those programs, you needn’t bother improving to the current standard,” Ms. Uro said. “You need to design it for the common core.”

For nearly two years, the council has of-
ferred sessions on the common core during the regular meetings. Ms. Uro conducts with district directors of English-learner programs. Part of that has included bringing in language-acquisition experts to explain the implications of the new standards for ELLs and to show explicitly, for example, how to teach complex texts to English-leaners.

The council is also coordinating a project to help districts provide information to parents of ELLs by writing guides on the new standards in Spanish, Chinese, and up to eight additional languages that are represented in urban school systems.

Ms. Uro is also serving on the steering committee of the Stanford project to keep “the district perspective in the mix and to make sure that we bring all of this down to a greater applicability at the district level.”

**Districts Adapt**

In the 345,000-student Miami-Dade school system, teachers and school administrators are largely forging ahead on their own to adapt the new standards for English-leaners, said Karen Spigler, the administrative director of language arts/reading and bilingual education/world languages for the district. This year, the common-core standards are already implemented in kindergarten and 1st grade, with 2nd and 3rd grades on tap to begin in the fall, she said.

The district offered teams of teachers in those early grades a two-day training to focus on how to bridge instruction—especially in reading—from the state standards they have been using to the common core, Ms. Spigler said.

A major component of that training, she said, was explaining to teachers how they must incorporate more nonfiction into the curriculum and how to figure out ways to judge the complexity of those texts for students.

“Our early-grade teachers think about children reading ‘stories,’ but we have to shift our thinking to how do we prepare them to read a science piece or something about the environment,” she said.

Another big shift for teachers—especially those working with ELLs—will be letting students struggle with difficult texts.

“That’s huge,” Ms. Spigler said. “We have been very focused on making everything readable for kids, and they haven’t been as successful in independently reading difficult texts.”

The vast majority of English-leaners in public schools are native Spanish-speakers. That reality has led to at least one large-scale, formal undertaking to translate the common standards into Spanish and provide “linguistic augmentation” to account for the differences between the two languages when necessary.

Called Common Core en Español, the project is being led by ELL practitioners in San Diego, in collaboration with San Diego State University, the California education department, and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

“We are staying very aligned with the common core. It’s the same content,” said Silvia C. Dorta-Duque de Reyes, a bilingual-services coordinator in the San Diego County office of education. “But because of the challenges that English-leaners face in accessing academic content as they learn the language, one of the ways to differentiate for them is to provide the access through their primary language.”

The content standards have already been translated, Ms. Reyes said, and now the team is in the midst of providing the “augmentation” to show, for example, that in Spanish, students must learn accentuation and accent rules.

After a peer-review process over the summer, the goal is to publish the translations and make them available to all states and school districts by the end of the year, she said.

Ms. Reyes is also serving on a key panel of experts in California who are charged with revising the state’s English-language-development standards so that they are in line with the common core. And she is providing professional-development seminars to school administrators and leaders to help them prepare for implementation in another year or so.

Many frontline teachers in California, however, aren’t at the point of being trained for the shift to the common core. The new assessments for common core will roll out during the 2014-2015 school year.

“These teachers are still being held accountable for results on the [state test],” Ms. Reyes said.

**Spanish Translation of Common Core Standards Makes Debut**

California educators working on translating the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts into Spanish have finished much of their work and are making the translations available to their colleagues around the country.

The Common Core en Español Project was led by the San Diego County Office of Education and done with support from the California Department of Education and the Council of the Chief State School Officers.

In addition to translations, the educators and language scholars have also written “linguistic augmentations” to address differences between English/language arts and Spanish/language arts, such as the use of accents. They also provide Spanish translations of the new common core English/language arts and mathematics standards specifically for California educators.

California’s translations also cover the state’s standards for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. These are also available on the state education agency’s common core website.

The translations are labeled as first-edition drafts, so it’s possible that the team will still be doing some fine-tuning. There are a few other efforts underway to provide translations of the common standards, including one being undertaken in New York state.
Guide Advises on Tying English Proficiency to Common Core

By Lesli A. Maxwell

As school districts forge ahead in putting the common academic standards into practice, many states are still revising or creating new English-language-proficiency standards to spell out for teachers the sophisticated language skills that their English-learner students will need to succeed with the rigorous new academic expectations.

To help states with that task, the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers late last month released a detailed set of guidelines created by English-language-learner experts and some of the lead writers of the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts and mathematics, as well as the Next Generation Science Standards.

The new guide, or framework, as it’s formally called, is designed to be a road map for states as they update, revamp, and rewrite the English-language-proficiency standards that teachers will use as guideposts to help ELL students acquire the academic language necessary to learn the new content.

“The implementation of the common core and the Next Generation Science Standards is going to be a heavy lift for a lot of kids, and probably most significantly for English-language learners,” said Andrés Henríquez, an education program officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which supported the development of the new framework.

“We want to make sure that states are thinking about what they have to do to make sure that their ELLs are well supported,” he said. “It’s critical for all of us to think about how we educate these students for the next generation.”

‘Correspond’ or Align?

The release of the framework comes at an optimal time for many states, which, under the requirements of waivers they have received from the U.S. Department of Education to ease provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, must have English-language-proficiency standards that “correspond” to the common core. Thirty-three states have already had their waivers approved; seven more have applied.

“For states, it’s tricky to know what ‘correspond’ means exactly,” said Kenji Hakuta, a Stanford University education professor and an expert on English-language learners who advised the group of writers that developed the framework. “What the framework writers have done is take the common core and the Next Generation Science Standards and identified the language demands in each of those content standards and described them.”

Many states have already been moving ahead with updating their English-language-proficiency standards.

California, home to 1.6 million ELLs, is in the final stages of revising its English-language-proficiency standards so that they correspond with the common standards. Florida is also revising its proficiency standards, as is New York. And the 28 states that belong to the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment consortium, or WIDA—representing a total of more than 1 million ELLs—now have a new edition of English-language-development standards that makes clear connections between the content standards of the common core across every grade level and the academic language that teachers will need to use to teach across varying levels of English proficiency.

Earlier Attempt

Title III of the No Child Left Behind law calls for states to have English-language-proficiency standards that are, in theory, to serve as a bridge to the language skills ELLs need to fully access and meet the achievement demands in the mishmash of academic-content standards that states had been using before the common core.

But many states didn’t actually create specific language standards by English-proficiency level that connected to academic content, said H. Gary Cook, an associate research scientist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is part of the team that developed the new framework.

“That’s why we wanted to create a tool for states to use to help them do this well,” Mr. Cook said.

The 105-page guide is highly technical and is meant primarily for the state-level policymakers who are overseeing the revamping of English-language-proficiency standards, Mr. Cook said.

But the guide includes extensive tables that describe, for each content area, the types of practices—such as arguing by using evidence in English/language arts, for example—that students must be able to handle. The tables describe the language demands behind each of those practices and outline how teachers might help ELLs meet those demands in the classroom.

“These tables are the meat of the framework,” Mr. Cook said.

Guadalupe Valdés, a Stanford University education professor who was also part of the team that devised the framework, said the guide is meant to help the writers of English-language-proficiency standards in state departments of education to “think about the many ways that people use language in the classroom and keep that image in their heads as they do this work.”

For example, Ms. Valdés said, using evidence to make an argument can play out in several ways for ELLs, regardless of their level of English proficiency. Students can work in small groups to talk about evidence for an argument, listen for evidence in what their teacher or a fellow student says, or look for evidence in their reading, she said.

“Ultimately, what we want to see happen is that English-learners are getting opportunities to do all of these more-rigorous practices even with less-than-perfect language,” she said. “Intellectually, they are able to engage in all of these practices.”
Testing Groups Work on Accessibility for English-Learners

By Lesli A. Maxwell

The rollout of common assessments to measure how students are mastering the Common Core State Standards is now less than two years away, and the two groups of states working to design the tests are ramping up efforts to ensure English-learners and students with disabilities won’t be left behind.

An overview of the testing accessibility and accommodation work underway at both the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers, or PARCC, was a major feature of an event in Washington on Tuesday that focused on the common-core standards and English-language learners. The American Federation of Teachers organized the panel, the second such event that the national teachers’ union has held on how the new standards will impact ELLs and their teachers.

Magda Chia, who is the director of support for under-represented students for the Smarter Balanced states, described the various technical advisory committees and other panels of experts working with the consortia to help guide their policymaking and decisionmaking when it comes to providing the various supports that ELLs may need in using the assessment system they are developing. The group is using a special tool developed by researchers at the University of Wisconsin that can grade test items by their language complexity and give test designers a clear picture of how they can make the language more accessible for an ELL without diluting the content being tested.

Smarter Balanced is also asking teachers to write and review test items, including those with expertise in working with ELLs, Chia said. Research is also under way, Chia said, to get a more “fine-grained” picture of the ELL subgroup, which despite its great diversity, has mostly been treated as a monolithic group in both assessment and accountability. For example, the consortia wants to break down the subgroup to look at how long ELLs have been in the United States (most are native-born) and to pinpoint the various stages of proficiency. The consortium is also collaborating with Jamal Abedi, a researcher at the University of California, Davis, on his study of how a “read-aloud” accommodation impacts ELLs’ performance on reading assessments.

Work around translation of Smarter Balanced’s math assessment is also under way, Chia said. This coming spring, the consortia will conduct a pilot of the assessment that uses customized pop-up glossaries in Spanish on test items for several grade levels. The group is looking for districts with large numbers of English-learners who are native Spanish speakers to participate in the pilot, she said.

Smarter Balanced will also be doing a full pilot-testing of both the ELA and math assessments in the spring and will need 1 million students to participate, Chia said.

“We need ELLs to be in those chairs taking the test,” she said.

At PARCC, similar efforts are unfolding, said Danielle Griswold, a program associate for Achieve and a member of the consortium’s policy, research and design unit.

Like Smarter Balanced, PARCC has a number of expert panels and committees advising them on how to make their assessment system work for ELLs. The group is applying the principles of Universal Design for Learning so that test items can be accessible to the “widest number of students without modifications,” she said.

Some of the testing supports that PARCC is weighing for ELLs include pop-up glossaries in students’ first language, captions for audio, highlighting of text, just to name a few.

Both testing consortia are working with their states to try and reach a common definition for who an English-learner is, as well as agreement on the types of accommodations for testing that ELLs should get. This is no lightweight undertaking as across the states now there is wide variability on the types of testing accommodations that English-learners receive.

The AFT event also featured presentations from Kenji Hakuta, the Stanford University professor who is heading up the Understanding Language project, and who also is advising both testing groups on ELL issues. Chris Minnich and Carrie Heath Phillips, from the Council of Chief State School Officers, presented the work that group has done to help guide states on developing new English-language-proficiency standards that connect to the common standards, as well as the new English-language-proficiency test it is involved in designing with Oregon and 12 other states. And Lydia Breiseth, the manager of the bilingual website Colorín Colorado, gave an overview of the numerous resources it offers around the common core to teachers and parents of English-language learners.

“We need ELLs to be in those chairs taking the test.”

MAGDA CHIA
Director, Support For Under-Represented Students, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium
Executive Summary:
The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Mathematics and for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects were developed under the sponsorship of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. The standards were designed to raise the skill and achievement levels of students in U.S. schools, in an effort to have the nation’s students graduate from high school “college and career ready.” In part, the impetus for the standards is to have the U.S. remain as competitive as possible in an increasingly flat and globalized world. The English Language Arts standards require students to, among other things, comprehend increasingly complex texts, understand a speaker’s point of view, build on others’ ideas and articulate their own ideas, make evidence-based claims and write from a variety of sources, and use language persuasively, including making arguments.

At their best, the CCSS create opportunities to maximize the potential and promise of students in U.S. schools through access to rigorous standards and high-quality learning. This in turn can help to narrow the achievement gap which has persisted for decades in the U.S., where the gap continues to widen for the fastest-growing segment of the school-aged population—English Language Learners (ELLs)—those students acquiring English as an additional language. It is estimated that by the 2030s, forty percent of all school-aged children and youth will be English Language Learners (Thomas & Collier, 2002), thus making a focus on their achievement of the standards an issue of national importance, as these students are, in very real terms, the future of the nation.
While ELLs are growing at a rate several times of all other groups, they are also among the lowest-performing students nationally. Taken as a subgroup of the K-12 population, English Language Learners have very low achievement outcomes, high dropout rates, low college attendance rates, and even lower college graduation rates (USDOE, 2012).

The CCSS offer little guidance on how educators should approach the standards with respect to ELLs, except to emphasize that all students should be held to the same high expectations, while recognizing that ELLs may require additional time, appropriate instructional support, aligned assessments, adjusted instruction, and close monitoring of their progress. In general, this places ELLs in a positive position in terms of expectations for their inclusion and success in meeting the standards. A consortium of organizations coordinated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2012) has issued the Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards Corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards for the purpose of offering guidance to states and ELL stakeholders on the development of English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards around the language practices that ELLs must acquire in order to successfully master the CCSS, and a structure for understanding the language demands of the CCSS and Next Generation Science Standards. The Framework can be utilized to help craft ELP standards, such that the developing needs of ELLs are met and they receive the equitable, rigorous, and systematic education intended by the standards.

Despite the design and adoption of rigorous standards that promote high levels of multiple literacies across a variety of text types, depth of understanding, critical thinking, and other “twenty-first century skills,” it is the implementation and teaching of these standards across a wide range of students, including those who are in the process of learning English, that will determine the educational value of the standards for these students. Educators at all levels will need opportunities to learn about how to teach to the standards, as well as professional learning focused on key principles for the effective education of English Learners, as outlined by the Understanding Language group at Stanford University, one of the many organizations nationwide working on this issue.

English Language Learners will have a competitive advantage over their monolingual classmates in the future if their primary language is maintained and leveraged to promote English language development and academic success. Educators, policymakers, and other key stakeholders must work together with a shared commitment to the academic success of ELLs if these students are to achieve at high levels and realize the promise of the CCSS—to be college and career ready in a multicultural and multilingual world.

References


Assessing English-Language Learners: One Size Does Not Fit All

By David N. Plank

¿Qué es lo que hace que una rama del gobierno no se vuelva demasiado poderosa?

If you know the answer to this question, congratulations! If you don’t, why not? Is it because you don’t understand the checks and balances built into the U.S. system of government, or because you don’t understand Spanish?

Every year, some 5 million public school students who are still mastering English take assessments to determine how much they know, how much progress they’ve made, and where they need support.

Unfortunately, the results of these tests are far from valid because many of these students are not sufficiently proficient in English to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities on assessments designed for native English-speakers. It is akin to asking someone to fill out a job application in a language he or she doesn’t understand even though that person can potentially do every aspect of the job.

Just as the prospective employer wants to know what the candidate can actually do, we need accurate information about English-language learners’ knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, the assessments that we administer in schools fail to fully uncover what we need to know.

This problem affects one of the fastest-growing groups of students in our nation’s public schools. English-language learners, or ELLs, are nearly 11 percent of the K-12 population, and about 80 percent of these students speak Spanish, with the rest speaking a wide variety of other languages. In California, more than half the children now entering public schools come from households where the first language is not English. Further, ELLs in the United States are not a monolithic group—they vary widely in proficiency in both their primary languages and in English.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers Consortium, or PARCC, and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, are the two U.S. Department of Education-funded consortia charged with developing a new generation of state assessments aligned to the common-core state standards. Developing fair and accurate assessments for English-language learners must be a focus of their work from the very beginning as well as at every stage in the development of these new assessment systems. This must be an integral, rather than peripheral, part of any assessment system that’s expected to serve all students well.

The federal government has also organized a funding competition for consortia of states to develop assessments of ELL students’ English-language proficiency that better reflect the language demands of the common core. This is another critical problem, closely related to and yet different from the problem of fairly and accurately assessing ELLs’ academic performance. At a minimum, the work of the consortia should be closely integrated with the work of PARCC and SBAC to ensure that the assessments administered to English-language learners take accurate account of their developing fluency in English.

ELLs confront great challenges when they start school, working simultaneously to master their second language and to learn grade-level subject matter in reading, language arts, math, science, and other subjects. English-language proficiency is foundational to academic success and critical to measured performance. It affects a student’s ability to learn academic content taught in English and to demonstrate skills through assessments conducted in English.

Underperforming on tests because of a lack of language fluency can unfairly depress students’ scores. If they perform poorly, we must determine why. Is it due to a lack of content knowledge or a lack of English proficiency? Is the assessment responsive to differences in students’ levels of fluency? Today, we fail to disentangle these issues far too often, with grave consequences for students.

But the problems with assessment go further because of the way the language-learner subgroup is constituted for accountability purposes. The most linguistically and academically accomplished students exit the English-language-learner category over time, as they become fluent in English. Those not making sufficient progress remain in the category, where they are joined by newly entering ELLs who are by definition at lower levels of language proficiency. State-level assessment results typically ignore these revolving-door practices, which wrongly stigmatize the language-learner subgroup, demoralize students and teachers, and prevent accurate reporting of long-term outcomes, including graduation rates and college access and success data.

What’s more, states have little incentive to track the long-term performance of English-learners who are reclassified as fluent in English. After two years of required monitoring, these students are no longer counted in ELL statistics. So there’s no reward if reclassified learners do well, and no accountability if they don’t.

Policymakers should take steps now to develop assessments and accountability practices that are more accurate and fair. The federal Education Department can require and ensure close collaboration among federally funded academic and English-language proficiency consortia.

A 2011 report from my organization, Policy Analysis for California Education, and the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy makes clear that new technologies, including computer-adaptive assessment and accommodated virtual performance assessments, can improve access and support the implementation of fairer and more accurate assessments. PARCC and SBAC can also invest in formative-assessment processes and practices to support better instructional strategies for all teachers of English-learners. When Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, lawmakers should set clear expectations for improving English-language proficiency and the performance of all students who have ever been categorized as English-language learners, with agreement to monitor these former language-learners...
for as long as they remain in the system.

The new assessment programs being developed by PARCC and SBAC must be more responsive to both the needs and strengths of English-learners. We owe it to students to ensure that assessments help them develop to their fullest potential, rather than leave them frustrated by low and inaccurate results. After all, if you can’t understand the test, how can you possibly pass it?

David N. Plank is the executive director of Policy Analysis for California Education, or PACE, an independent, nonpartisan research center based at the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Southern California; and Stanford University. Before joining PACE in January 2007, he was a professor at Michigan State University, where he founded and directed the Education Policy Center. Mr. Plank is the author or editor of six books, including the American Educational Research Association’s Handbook of Education Policy Research (2009).
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http://www.wida.us/assessment/assets.aspx
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Common Core en Español
http://commoncore-espanol.com/
San Diego County Office of Education

English Language Development (ELD) Standards
http://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx
World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment

The English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century consortium (ELPA21)

Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards corresponding to the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards
http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/The_Common_Core_and_English_Language_Learners
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The Road Ahead for State Assessments
http://renniecenter.issuelab.org/resource/road_ahead_for_state_assessments
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