Teachers' Perspectives on Language Assessment and Effective Strategies for Young English Language Learners in Florida

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings of an empirical study that examined elementary school teachers' views about the English language learners' (ELLs) program placement assessment, and progress

assessment. Specifically, the interviews in the study explored teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of these assessments and the connection between language assessment and curricular decisions. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to gain insights into language strategies that these teachers used to promote better teaching and learning for ELLs. In this article, an overview of the current assessment system for ELLs in Florida is provided, then the findings regarding the value of assessment are discussed as well as effective teaching strategies. The article concludes with implications for teachers, teacher educators and school district personnel.

Introduction

The increased focus on language assessment promotes effective teaching and learning. However, these efforts can be productive only when language teachers are knowledgeable about the assessment, the process of implementation, interpretation of assessment results, and most importantly, the use of these results for further improving education. Studies indicate that language teachers are often unprepared to maximize the benefits of assessment results (Popham, 2004). For their contribution to be effective, teachers must have language assessment literacy, which is defined as "the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and principles of test construction, test interpretation and use, test evaluation, and classroom-based assessments alongside the development of a critical stance about the functions of assessment within a larger educational context" (Lam, 2015 p. 170).

Language assessment literacy must be an acquired and mastered skill for teachers who educate English language learners (ELLs) in the United States of America. Out of 5 million ELLs in the public schools in the USA, many of them have no or limited access to quality educational programs (Anyon, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2004). The lack of access to an optimal education, which includes quality English language teaching, is mirrored by the achievement gap between ELLs and native speakers of English. Specifically, there *was a 36-point gap at the 4th-grade level and a 44-point gap at the 8th-grade level between the scores of native English speakers and ELLs, and this achievement gap has remained unchanged each year between 2002 and 2011 (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In addition, ELLs' high dropout rate and low college enrollment and graduation numbers suggest the ineffectiveness of educating ELLs in the public school system (Giambo, 2010; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013; Romo, 2013)

In Florida, 28% of school-aged students speak a language other than English at home (US Census Bureau, 2015). In public schools in Florida, the META Consent Decree, which is the framework for compliance with federal and state laws, regulates the identification, eligibility and programmatic assessment for ELLs (FDOE Consent Decree, n.d.). *Considering the stagnating achievement gap, questions related to the role of* assessment and language instruction across the curriculum in a multilingual classroom are essential to ask in order to determine the current status, effective practices, and areas for improvement. It is essential to examine teachers' perceptions of the nature and effectiveness of language assessment because teachers' views and beliefs regarding language teaching have an impact on their practices, instruction, and communication in and outside the classroom (DeJong & Harper, 2005; Zheng, 2009). In this current article, authors report on a small scale study in which six early childhood teachers shared their views about language assessments and effective strategies for young English language learners in Florida. To situate the study, authors provide an overview of the current assessment system for ELLs in public schools. Then we describe the themes of these teachers' views that emerged to make some conclusions related to the current situation.

Current Identification and Assessment of English Language Learners

The current landscape of language assessment for ELLs in Florida is determined by the META Consent Decree which addresses the civil rights of ELL students, such as their right to equal access to all education programs. Through these rights, the META Consent Decree provides a structure that ensures the delivery of comprehensible instruction to which ELLs are entitled. (FDOE Rules & Legislation, n.d.). As Table 1 shows it consists of six major sections which cover identification of ELL students, assessment, access to programming and categorical programs, the requirements for personnel, and monitoring and outcome measures

Section	Description
Section I: Identification and Assessment	All students with limited English proficiency must be properly identified and assessed to ensure the provision of appropriate services. This section details the procedures for placement of students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, their exit from the program, and the monitoring of students who have been exited.
Section II: Equal access to appropriate programming	All ELLs are entitled to programming which is appropriate to their level of English proficiency, their level of academic achievement, and any special needs they may have. ELLs shall have equal access to appropriate English language instruction, as well as instruction in basic subject areas, which is understandable to the students given their level of English proficiency.
Section III: Equal access to appropriate categorical and programs	ELLs are entitled to equal access to all programs appropriate to their academic needs, such as compensatory, exceptional, adult, vocational or early childhood education, as well as dropout prevention and other support services, without regard to their level of English proficiency.
Section IV: Personnel	This section details the certificate coverage and in-service training that teachers must have in order to be qualified to instruct ESOL students. Teachers may obtain the necessary training through university course work or through school district provided in-service training.
Section V: Monitoring issues	The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) is charged with the monitoring of local school districts to ensure compliance with the provisions of the Consent Decree pursuant to federal and state laws.
Section VI: Outcome measures	FDOE is required to develop an evaluation system to address equal access and program effectiveness. This evaluation system is to collect and analyze data regarding the progress of ELL students and include comparisons between the ELL and the non-ELL population regarding retention rates, graduation rates, dropout rates, grade point averages and state assessment scores

Table 1 Description of sections of Meta Consent Decree
Source: FLDOE *Rules & Legislation, n.d.*

Identification of ELLs

For the purpose of this study*, Section I. Identification and Assessment* contains essential information about language assessments. According to the META Consent Decree, a home language survey must be administered upon registration in a public school. The survey has the following questions:

Is a language other than English used in the home?

Does the student have a first language other than English?

Does the student most frequently speak a language other than English?

When there is at least one 'yes' for these questions, the students will be assessed for English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening in English within 20 days after enrollment. If the student scores in the 32th percentile or below on any of these subskills, the student is classified as an ELL who is eligible for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) services. In addition, ELLs are to be assessed in academic areas to assist the teacher who develops the instructional program. Consequently, the student will receive ESOL services according to his/her individualized ESOL plan. Students classified as ELLs continue to receive appropriate instruction and services until he/she is reclassified as English proficient (FDS Florida Administrative, 2017). Table 2 provides information about the identification process with consideration of the different entry points for ELLs. It shows how different school districts collaborate in terms of accepting assessment results for students who are moving from one school district to the other.
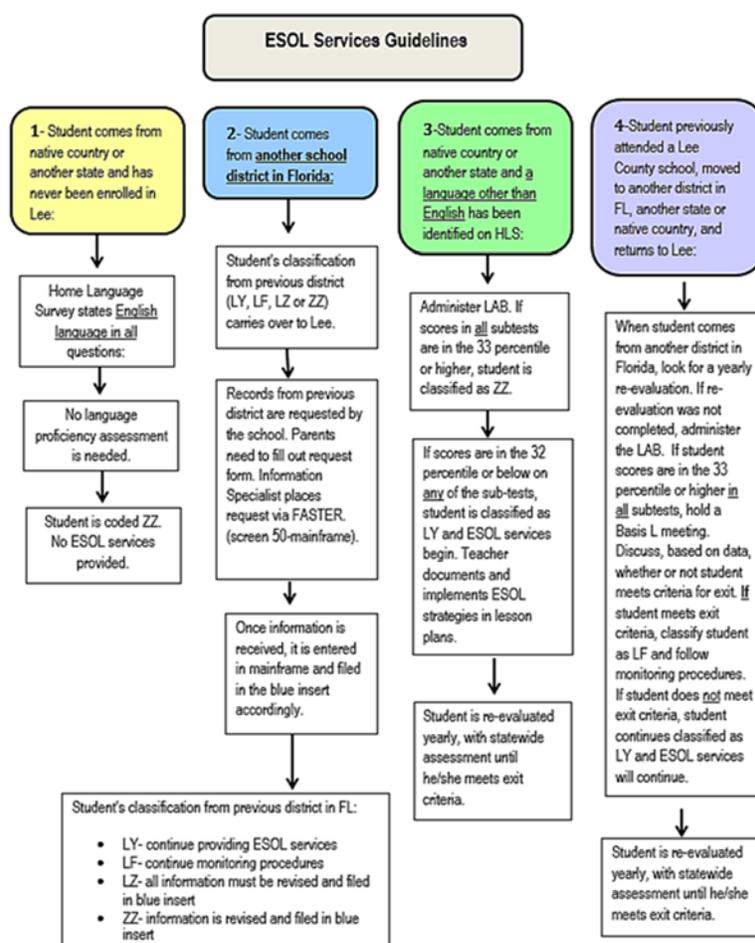

Table 2 Identification process of ELL in Florida
Source: ESOL Services, n.d.

Language Assessment of ELLs

In the selected school district in this study, a variety of language assessments are used for determining placement and documenting progress of ELLs. Specifically, for determining the correct placement of ELLs, the *Language Assessment Battery (LAB*) is used to measure English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Additional assessment is used in ELLs native language to measure their academic preparedness e.g. in reading in the native language. In Florida, 72% of ELLs (N= 199,000) speak Spanish as their native language. The second largest student population (N=27, 500) which is 10% of ELLs in Florida, speak Haitian Creole as their native language (Soto, Hooker & Batalova, 2015). When a student comes from a Spanish speaking country, *Aprenda,* an assessment targeting reading and math skills in Spanish for students in K-12 grades is used to identify the student's academic needs. Furthermore, *Aprenda* is also used to determine the student's eligibility for gifted programs. In addition, *Crane,* an assessment to determine a Spanish speaking student's dominant language is administered for ensuring that the student's dominant language is used for further screening and evaluation of special needs. In the case of students from Haiti, *EKA* is used to measure students' reading level in their native language. Furthermore, to collect information about the educational background of students who are non-Spanish native speakers, parents are surveyed with a form due to the lack of appropriate assessment. (District ELL plan, 2016).

After the identification process, the ELL receives appropriate language instruction and annually takes an assessment to measure his/her progress. In selected school districts, *ACCESS for ELLs 2.0* assessment is utilized for this purpose. It is a large-scale English language proficiency assessment administered to kindergarten through 12th grade ELLs. It is aligned with the *WIDA English Language Development Standards (*WIDA, n.d.) and assesses listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The purpose of using *ACCESS for ELLs 2.0* is (1) helping students and families understand students' current level of English language proficiency (2) serving as one of multiple measures used to determine whether students are prepared to exit ESOL programs, (3) providing teachers with information for enhancing instruction and learning, and (4) providing districts with information that will help them evaluate the effectiveness of their ESOL/bilingual programs. Table 3 demonstrates the path for ELLs who meet/do not meet the exit criteria from the ESOL program (District ELL plan, 2016).
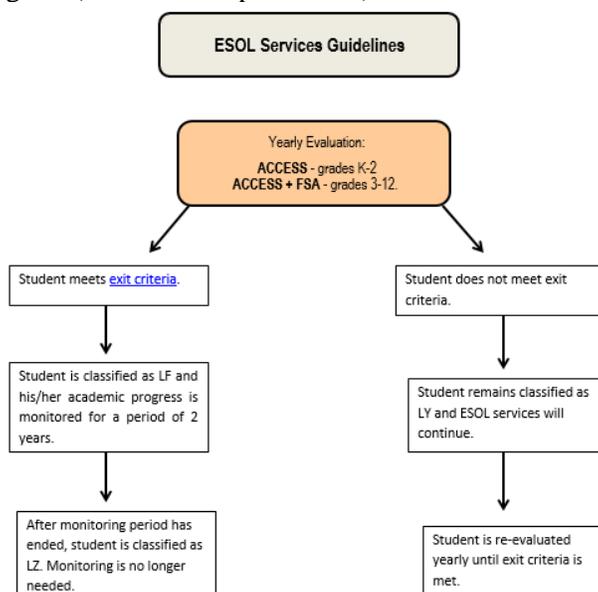

Table 3 Processes addressing yearly language assessment results
Source: ESOL Services, n.d.

When an ELL meets the exit criteria, the student stops receiving ESOL services. However, he/she is monitored for two more years to ensure that his/her language proficiency is satisfactory for grade level academic work. In case the ESOL committee finds that the student's academic achievement is impeded by the lack of language proficiency, the student will re-enter the ESOL program. Ultimately, after the monitoring period is over, the student is no longer identified as ELL (FDS Administrative, 2017.).

Although the process and assessments are regulated by the META Consent Decree, school districts also have flexibility regarding the type of assessment to be used for program placement and/or progress monitoring. When aligned with the Meta Consent requirements, school district professionals can determine the specific ESOL plan for the given district (District ELL plan, 2016). The implementation of this plan is monitored by the Department of Education, and the assessment data inform state officials about the outcomes of the educational program for the ELLs (FDOE Rules & Legislation, n.d.).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' views about the use and effectiveness of language assessments and to gain insights into their perspectives on best teaching practices with ELLs. Therefore, the following questions were posed:

What views do teachers of young ELLs hold about language assessment and its use for curricular decisions?

What pedagogical practices do teachers find effective for teaching English as a second language to young children?

Participants

In this study, we used convenience sampling composed of five teachers - two kindergarten teachers, three third grade teachers,- and one paraprofessional who was hired for assisting ELLs. All participants had at least one year of teaching experience with ELLs. The five teachers had ESOL endorsement, which was composed of the completion of five college classes or 300 hours of professional development at the school district level. Therefore, these teachers met the state requirement which mandates that all public school teachers who teach ELLs are required to earn ESOL endorsement (FLDOE Rules and regulations, n.d.). The paraprofessional who was a native speaker of the Spanish language had 18 hours of training in ESOL. In addition, one teacher out of five was fluent in Spanish: all others were monolingual.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual structured interviews were conducted. Nine questions were posed to each teacher regarding 1.) experience with teaching ELLs, 2.) the effectiveness of placement and progress assessments and 3.) pedagogical approaches used to promote better teaching and learning for ELLS. Interviewees were also asked to respond with examples of each. The approximately 30 minute interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, observations were conducted to gain insights into the strategies that teachers used to facilitate ELLs' language and subject area learning. Both the interview data and the observation data were analyzed with the "data analysis spiral" approach which includes the following steps: (1) data management (2) initial reading and taking notes and (3) coding, describing and interpreting data (Creswell, 2003). The findings were organized based on the categories that emerged through the data analysis and reported by the research questions.

Findings

Teachers' Views on Language Assessment

This study examined teachers' views about language assessment for ELLs in public schools. Overall, to various degrees, teachers were familiar with different types of assessments e.g. *LAB* and *ACCESS for ELLs 2.0*. However, often they referred to assessment in reading, alphabet knowledge and vocabulary as language assessment for ELLs. This lack of clarity of the purpose of different assessments might indicate a gap in their knowledge regarding the proper use of specific language assessments for ELLs.

From the interviews, the following themes emerged: (1) confusion in perceived responsibilities and (2) flaws in the use of assessment data. In terms of holding responsibility for assessment, teachers expressed frustration. They mentioned that in their schools, it is the ESOL teacher or ESOL paraprofessional who is responsible for administering the placement and progress assessment rather than the classroom teachers. Teachers felt that they are often excluded from test result discussions and instead that they are only given the final decisions and scores. Ultimately, most teachers felt that there was a lack of communication about testing and test results between classroom teacher and ESOL professionals. For example, one teacher stated, "I do not feel that they[assessments] are effective at all. We have no initial testing data on the student." Another teacher supported the same view, "Since testing results are not shared and explained, I do not feel that they are effective at all." Although they recognized the lack of communication and collaboration between classroom teachers and ESOL professionals, the teachers did not mention any steps that they tried to take in order to mitigate the problem. This lack of collaboration and effective use of assessment data can result in a lack of accountability, which probably negatively impact the education of ELLs. Interestingly, the one teacher who held the highest ESOL qualifications emphasized the importance of language assessment results for planning instruction while acknowledging her role as well. She noted that, "Language assessment data is essential when planning for ELLs. Language data lets me know if I need to focus on phonics, fluency or comprehension. ELLs do not perform well in vocabulary assessment, so the data helps me decide whether to reteach the materials." Overall, it seems that teachers see their involvement in language assessment in various ways. Most teachers do not feel accountable for the meaningful use of assessment results, though some recognize the important link between assessment results and planning appropriate instruction and act accordingly.

Teachers pointed out several flaws related to the current language assessments. They felt that students can exit the ESOL program too early due to the very low cut score (32 percentile). Teachers in this study believed that these students would need further help in learning English in order to successfully participate in academic learning. Furthermore, regarding another flaw, one teacher stated, "These assessments don't always show what ELLs are truly capable of doing." She advocated for bilingual assessment, which would provide a more valid picture of the student's performance level in a given subject. Several teachers felt that students should be allowed to "test in the language they are fluent in". Clearly they recognized that ELLs are often unable to demonstrate their knowledge in a subject area due to the lack of English proficiency.

Teachers' Views on Effective Strategies for ELLs

In this study, we also examined teachers' views about effective teaching strategies for ELLs in kindergarten and third grade. Overall, kindergarten teachers in the study focused on social language development for communication in everyday situations. Teachers of third graders, however, emphasized the importance of developing academic vocabulary and sentence structure essential in subject areas such as science and social studies. From the interviews and the observations, a variety of effective strategies for young ELLs emerged.

For both teaching English for social and academic purposes, using visuals was found as a basic and important strategy. Specifically, all teachers in the observation used graphic organizers for teaching vocabulary. These graphic organizers displayed information about the new vocabulary in written and picture form. In addition, the most frequently used visual strategies were, for example, creating flip-books, using vocabulary charts, and using pictures to express meaning.

Teachers pointed out that essential vocabulary should be explicitly taught to help ELLs develop social and academic language in English. Regarding language for social purposes, the explicit vocabulary instruction was infused in everyday activities, such as calendar time and snack time. In addition, one teacher shared that she taught practical phrases such as "tie, please" so the ELL students could practice their English skills in simple social situations. In addition, with these simple practical expressions, ELLs were able to express their needs without becoming frustrated due to the lack of language proficiency. In terms of academic vocabulary, a teacher discussed how she pre- taught academic vocabulary, prior to whole group reading: sharing the meaning of the word, often with pictures and giving examples for how to use the word in sentences. Afterwards, when these words were encountered during the reading, the teacher checked for understanding by asking comprehension questions using the new vocabulary.

Kagan Activities (Kagan, 2009.) was a broadly used strategy to increase interaction between students in the kindergarten classroom. In particular, these Kagan activities often target both academic and social purposes simultaneously using collaboration, cooperation and interaction among students. For example, in an activity during the observation, students moved around the room to find a partner with whom they talked about a specific topic, such as dinner last night. Moreover, to increase interaction most teachers seemed to use the strategy of peer tutoring: sometimes paring students with native speakers of English and at other times pairing them with students who speak the same language e.g. Spanish.

Planning instruction that incorporates ELLs' background knowledge and experience is important. Although only one teacher acknowledged the importance of students' background knowledge, she strongly emphasized the need for building the bridge between experiences at school and home. She stated, "I use a culturally responsive approach when working with ELLs. I try to teach through their cultural strength, while helping them connect to their home lives and prior experiences to make learning meaningful." Conversely, another teacher commented on the lack of ELLs' background knowledge. Clearly, she did not realize and recognize the value of the knowledge that ELLs bring from their own culture. She seemed to evaluate issues from the majority 's perspective, disregarding the "funds of knowledge" children with different cultural backgrounds possess (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Discussion and Conclusions

This study was designed on the assumption that all teachers who teach English language learners must have language assessment literacy, which includes the ability to administer, score and interpret results of language assessments. Specifically, the certification exam for ESOL teachers in Florida requires teachers to have specific competencies related to assessment, e.g. "Evaluate formal and informal assessments to measure oral language, literacy, and academic achievement" and "Determine appropriate accommodations during formal and informal assessments of ELLs at varying English language proficiency levels." (Competencies and Skills, 2015, p. 85). This mandated skill set is essential in order for teachers to be knowledgeable users of language assessment. Ultimately this knowledge will drive their curricular decisions and instruction and maximize the learning opportunity for ELLs.

This study suggests that teachers have knowledge and understanding about assessment to various degrees. It seems that teachers who have more extensive preparation in ESOL topics are the ones who can fulfill the expectations in terms of using assessment to design optimal instruction. They are also the ones who seem to pursue culturally responsive approaches and acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. On the other hand, some teachers, often with less ESOL preparation, separate their own duties from those including language assessment. This approach is not conducive to ELLs' academic progress. In most schools in Florida, ELLs are integrated into mainstream classrooms with children who are native speakers of English. Therefore, it is the classroom teacher who is responsible for using strategies that make instruction accessible and understandable for ELLs. To be able to select and implement effective strategies, teachers must understand the student's proficiency level and language related needs from the assessment results. Therefore, continuous professional development in topics related to ESOL is essential for teachers so that they are able to utilize assessment data for instruction and to infuse students' experiential and cultural background in the curriculum.

Teachers in this study pointed out two major challenges – early exit from ESOL programs and the lack of opportunity for taking subject area assessment in the native language. Their awareness of the inappropriate early exit from ESOL services is important because these teachers have become advocates for extended ESOL services that provide additional language instruction to students who exit the ESOL program prematurely.

Some of these teachers also seemed to be supportive of emergent bilingualism, which involves the process of English language learning with the maintenance and development of the native language of the ELLs (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). Teachers in this study acknowledged that ELLs could benefit from a learning environment in which their native language is recognized and supported to avoid subtractive bilingualism in which the new language suppresses the first language (Wright, 2010). This finding is important because bilingualism and bilingual education are often targeted by supporters of the English only movement (Ricento, 2005). These teachers' request for bilingual assessment indicates their understanding of how language proficiency and subject area knowledge should be assessed separately. Ultimately, the more teachers understand the benefits of bilingualism, the more they can be expected to advocate and implement appropriate assessment and instruction for ELLs.

This study had a limited number of participants. Therefore, the in-depth exploration of their views on language assessment and ESOL strategies was meaningful rather than aiming for more generalizable findings. Although a higher number of participants might add additional views on the topic of investigation, it would not challenge the existence of the views of these participants (Ernest 2001). It is important to keep in mind that these participants were from one school district, therefore, their views might be impacted by their experience in this shared context. It is also important to note that these teachers volunteered to participate in the study, therefore we assume they had a special interest in ELLs. Because of these limitations, teachers' views explored in this preliminary qualitative study cannot be generalized beyond the context. For future research, it would be meaningful to examine teachers' views about ESOL assessment and effective teaching and learning strategies in a study that would recruit participants from wider geographical locations.

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