

Limits of English Proficiency Assessments and Sociocultural Issues

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NCLB and ELLs

- ELL academic achievement challenge treated as symptom of limited English proficiency in 4 modalities and comprehension
- Belief that new English proficiency [ELP] assessments can be designed to capture “academic language proficiency” based on ELD standards
- Thru better sampling of language related tasks and thru inclusion of subject matter specific language

Fundamental Breakdown

- Assessment designers and users typically assume competencies can adequately measured separated from the contexts in which competencies are acquired/practiced
- Claim: ELP tests at best can only yield a limited view of how academic communicative functioning is influenced by the background of ELLs and by the lived sociocultural contexts of classroom learning as activity (as in CHAT)

Situated Nature of Practice, and Language Modalities [1]

- Consider context as a social construction and fundamentally a “what if”, “so what, then” negotiation. Constant predication arises naturally
- 4 modalities of language use are deeply interrelated though they develop with many unique characteristics and implications for semiotic functioning

Situated Nature of Practice, and Language Modalities [2]

- BICS/CALP distinction interpreted too simplistically and distorts construction of context in social practice and its relation to language(s)
- Construction of context is constantly arising: in assessment, classroom activity, everywhere—Hymes argued this, though others, early on, such as Gumperz emphasized its inherent processive, negotiated, and non-deterministic dynamics

What does it mean to “measure” vs. the constructionist modeling of “acquisition”?

- Measurement of ELP typically taken as a status measure—the item stats tell the “truth” and inform the measurement model
- The notion that ELP is subject to constructionist modeling is avoided because it is viewed as unscientific
- A problem for the above is that setting expectations in a projective, constructionist fashion constructs social reality itself and student expectations of who they are and can become—very upsetting for the objectivists, but OK with CHAT and related perspectives

Challenge of Making ELL Assessment Meaningful to Learning

- From social constructionist and CHAT perspectives: How do we build new ELD “assessment” paradigms?
- Formative assessment approaches suggest the possibility of looking at skill acquisition developmentally in ways that might inform instruction—e.g. w/in learning progressions
- What if we considered assessment as part of instructional learning activity itself...as present in the *in situ* interactions among learning/teaching participants?

Assessments Embedded in Classroom Learning Activity

Following Erickson 2007 [p. 187]

- “*Proximal assessment* is consonant with a notion of teaching and learning as continuous and open-ended; a process that can be seen in the ongoing course of the interaction between students, classroom materials, and the teacher.”
- “By *proximal formative assessment*, I mean the continual ‘taking stock’ that teachers [and students] engage in by paying firsthand observational attention to students during the ongoing course of instruction—careful attention focused upon specific aspects of a student’s developing understanding and mastery of skills, as instruction is taking place in real time.”

Need Conceptual Models of Proximal Formative Assessment that Start with Treating Learning and Language Competence as Situated In Activity

- in Classroom Cultural Contexts
- with Clear Learning Goals
- and Instructional Activity Targeted at Attaining Goals
- Providing Evidence of Learning Uptake and Generalization/Transfer

Activity Theory and Proximal Assessment Hypothesis

- Students need to understand their role as learners of target skills in classroom instructional practice
- Acquiring target skills in learning activity requires learning to enact the roles and identity of a skill-user in the making
- Requires actions on the part of learners responsive to continuous shared assessment and self-assessment of performance

Learning and Self-Assessment in *Wh Question Answering* in a 4th Grade Bilingual Cooperative Group (Durán and Syzmanski, 1997)

- Teacher Schematizes and Models Question Answering for Students in a Whole Class Mode
- Has Students Work in Small Groups to Discuss How They Answer a Question Based on a Story Passage
- Students Discuss How to Go About Answering the Question and their Interactions Reveal their Mutual Assessment of their Mastery at Answering the Question Based on Emulating the Teacher's Schema
- The Teacher Monitors Group Interactions and Provides Formative Assessment Feedback

Instructional Schema for Written Wh Question Answering

- Teacher explains difference between answering written as opposed to spoken questions
- After whole class reads a text passage, teacher models process for whole class with an example question
 - Underlining the Wh portion of the question that will serve as the initial part of the grammatical frame for the written answer
 - Determining the semantic answer response
 - Creating a fuller grammatical frame for the answer
 - Fitting the answer response to the grammatical frame
- Students undertake process in cooperative groups with new questions, teacher moves among groups to assist

Study Approach and Select Findings

- Analyzed Video Recorded Teacher and Student Interaction in Wh Question Activities
- Students Negotiated Written Answers w/out (or with) Teacher Immediately Present
- Students Used Teacher Model as Scaffold and as a Reference Point for Group and Self-Assessment--e.g., students “echoed” teacher talk about how to analyze question meaning and grammar and how to answer questions given question
- Sometimes Spanish was Used as a Resource to Answer in English

Concluding Comments

- Findings compatible with a Vygotskian account of assisted performance (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) and Activity Theory account of mediation (Wertsch, 1991)
- We might do well to reframe what we mean by “performance” in “performance” assessment so as to capture *dramaturgical* sense of “performance”
- Acting like a competent learner means self-regulation and self-assessment as a competent learner as envisioned both idiosyncratically and collectively by participants in a classroom
- Should maintain research and practice momentum for proximal formative assessment to understand/improve ELL students’ acquisition of academic language skills
- Approach can inform evidence centered design of assessments

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