Critical Issues at the Interface Between Assessment and U.S. Language Education Policy

The Contribution of PreK-12 Standards to Assessment and Language Education Policy

AAAL 2009 Annual Conference
Denver, CO
March 22, 2009

Margo Gottlieb
World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium and Illinois Resource Center
Assessing Current Language Education Policies
No Child Left Behind has galvanized attention to the challenges we face, particularly the challenges of inequity.

(Gamoran, 2007)
And nowhere have the challenges of inequity been more pronounced than in the **ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS!**
No Child Left Behind....
Language education policies: Levels of implementation.

- National
- State/District
- Program/School
- Classroom
Examining
Language Proficiency Standards
Language proficiency standards, as mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001):

- highlight the role of language in the education of English language learners...in particular, academic language requisite for academic success

- require states to connect grade-level content to students’ language development

- have fostered the reconceptualization, operationalization, and validation of language proficiency

- have helped to elevate the status of language education
The glass half empty scenario

Language proficiency standards:

- tend to de-emphasize the critical role of native language (L1) in second language (L2) development
- are often interpreted as defacto curriculum
- tend to narrow the instructional focus
- have made teaching and assessment robotic, not robust
However, pitfalls can be avoided.

In conjunction with language proficiency standards, we need to:

- define the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement

- focus on what students CAN DO, and not view language education as an intervention to reduce the achievement gap

- formulate realistic language education policies that emphasize expected language growth for individual student profiles
Revisiting the Assessment of Language Learners
Positive assessment policies stem from:

- Increased recognition that assessment needs to be targeted and differentiated, as instruction, according to students’ levels of language proficiency and achievement.

- Creation of aligned assessment systems in which stakeholders partake in the development process, implementation and evaluation of their effectiveness.

- Use of data from multiple sources (both language proficiency and achievement) that contribute to a defensible body of evidence for language learners.
The glass half empty scenario

In large part, assessment policy has remained status quo for testing academic achievement….except for the proliferation of test accommodations.

Little attention has been paid to content tests normed on first language learners for second language learners in regard to their:

- Design (content validity, cultural bias)
- Development
- Administration
- Impact (McKay, 2006)
However, pitfalls can be avoided.

In conjunction with large-scale content tests, we need to restructure test pathways for L2 learners that:

- Take students’ L1 literacy into account and that use language proficiency data to mediate or contextualize achievement data

- Consider students’ levels of language proficiency in test design, development, and interpretation of results

- Offer accommodations only when students have reached a threshold of English language proficiency and when language is no longer a confounding variable (Gottlieb, 2003, 2006)
Speculating Future National Language Assessment Policies
Education: The Eternal Pendulum
Today’s antidote to high-stakes summative testing……

Formative classroom assessment

However, which type of formative assessment?
A continuum of assessments used for 
formative purposes

Idiosyncratic → Common → Interim

Benchmark
To effect change in policy in language education, we must realize that with accountability, comes responsibility.
Action Steps:

1. All administrators and teachers must become assessment literate.

2. All administrators and teachers must become familiar with the unique characteristics of English language learners, knowledgeable of the language development process, and apply that understanding to assessment.

3. All administrators and teachers must become advocates for English language learners (contextualize their data) and support the communities in which they live.
Furthermore,

- We must honor the role of language teachers in educating English language learners and value the data they collect idiosyncratically for personal accountability.

- We must elevate the status of common language assessment to produce defensible school, program, and district level data on which to rest accountability.

- We must forge collaboration and meaningful relationships between language and general education to develop reciprocal and respectable policies for all students.
Needed: A Balanced System

Standards

State Assessment

District Assessment

Program and Classroom Assessment
Juxtaposing…

- Language proficiency and academic content standards
- Formative and summative information
- Language proficiency and academic achievement data
Within the balanced system...

- Weight the contributions for each level of implementation- national, state, district
- Maintain acceptable levels of reliability, validity, and utility for all measures
- Contextualize results within given parameters of accountability
So that we not only aim for, but hit realistic educational targets for our language learners!