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assessment report

Aligning ELP Assessments to ELP Standards

Diane F. Johnson

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Introduction

Intensified attention to alignment between state English language proficiency (ELP) assessments and state ELP standards has primarily been driven by the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB). Prior to the implementation of NCLB, only a few states with historically large English language learner (ELL) populations, such as California and Texas, had developed ELP standards. Since the passage of NCLB, nearly all states have established standards for ELP students. This development has been reported widely in the press (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

A strong alignment between a state's ELP assessments and the ELP standards is critical to ensuring the validity of the assessments. An equally compelling purpose of this strong alignment is to create a stronger link between the state ELP assessment and the ELL curriculum. For assessment to inform classroom instruction—one of the main goals of assessment—content of the state assessment must be based on the state ELP standards. Only when this match is established will assessment results be meaningful and useful in improving student performance. Current research provides several leading alignment models, including the Webb model, the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum (SEC), and the model developed by Achieve, Inc. (CCSSO, 2002; Webb, 1997; 1999).

Research concerning these models has focused on aligning achievement assessments to content standards. However, ELP assessments and standards entail constructs based on second language acquisition (SLA) principles. Traditionally, education research concerning alignment has not specifically included the constructs derived from SLA principles. Consequently, the language development levels described by SLA theory, which are reflected in most state ELP standards, are not addressed by the current academic alignment methodologies. This paper presents a protocol for conducting ELP alignment studies using an adaptation of Dr. Webb's methodology developed at the Wisconsin Center for Education

Research. This new ELP protocol was designed by Dr. H. Gary Cook of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research with the assistance of ELP assessment specialists at Pearson Inc. (Pearson).

Depth of Knowledge in ELP Standards

The Webb alignment methodology employs Cognitive Levels of Difficulty, or Depth of Knowledge (DOK), as one of several important criteria for alignment. DOK describes the hierarchy of cognitive complexity in assessments and standards. While appropriate for content standards, DOK does not capture the linguistic hierarchy that forms the foundation of ELP standards. Most state ELP standards are expressed through a linguistic developmental hierarchy that commonly represents language development as beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Some state standards include four or five levels of language development in English to create an even more fine-grained description of English language learner growth. State ELP standards are usually written for grade spans, such as kindergarten through grade 2, grades 3 through 5, grades 6 through 8, and grades 9 through 12. Nevertheless, the standards for each ELP test grade span must include a range of proficiency from beginning through advanced. English language proficiency is not correlated with a student's age or grade. Therefore, within any grade a broad range of English language proficiency can be found among the students.

Linguistic Difficulty Levels

An effective alignment methodology should be able to quantify the fundamental characteristic of ELP standards described above. The data from an alignment study should be able to verify the degree to which an ELP assessment is appropriately testing the requisite range of language proficiency for each grade span. One key element in the ELP alignment methodology used by Pearson is the use of alignment criteria that take into account the hierarchy of linguistic developmental levels, also called Linguistic Difficulty Levels (LDL). These Linguistic Difficulty Levels are correlated to the common SLA developmental levels of beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Assignment of LDLs to standards and test questions serves as an effective substitute for Webb's Cognitive Levels of Difficulty.

Operationally, LDLs are referred to as Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 in ascending order of difficulty. This design is intended to maintain simplicity so that the concept of Linguistic Difficulty Levels is easily accessible to a wide audience. As many people who are involved in ELP alignment (such as educators) may have little or no linguistic training, ensuring the clarity of the levels is essential.

Descriptors for the levels have also deliberately been kept brief and simple to allow states to interpret the levels to suit their own ELP standards.

The basic LDL descriptors are as follows:

- Level 1 is characterized by elementary features—a limited to basic ability to process formulaic English linguistic features.
- Level 2 is characterized by standard constructions—a basic to moderate ability and facility to process English linguistic features.
- Level 3 is characterized by complex formulations—a moderate to sophisticated ability and facility to process English linguistic features.

Table 1 provides more specific descriptions of the LDLs as they pertain to the two primary linguistic modes, oral language and written language.

Linking ELP Assessment to State Content Standards

An additional element of the Pearson ELP alignment process is the linkage of ELP assessment to state academic content standards. The impetus for this linkage is a provision of NCLB that requires states to link their ELP standards to their academic content standards. At first, this task may seem unreasonable since the former set of standards is grounded in second language acquisition while the latter is based on the academic curriculum. Moreover, these two sets of standards, ELP and academic content, represent very different cognitive processes. However, at the root of linking ELP standards to state academic content standards is the idea that the final goal for English language learners is the acquisition of sufficient English fluency to enable them to participate in regular academic classes without the English language being a barrier to their learning. Therefore, linking ELP standards to academic content standards provides access to exactly the academic language that English language learners need to know and be able to use proficiently.

While NCLB is not explicit about how to link these divergent standards, it is understood that linkage can only be accomplished through the language of the standards and not through the actual content. If academic content were to be interjected into an ELP assessment, that assessment would become invalid. So, the alignment of ELP assessment to state academic content standards is not intended to guarantee coverage of academic content by an ELP assessment, but rather to guarantee that more rigorous academic language—the discourse of math, science, and social studies classrooms—is included in the ELP assessment.

Recent State Alignment Studies

These two features of our ELP alignment methodology—identification of Linguistic Difficulty Levels and determining linkage to academic content standards—allow for a more robust and descriptive ELP alignment. Two states, South Dakota and Michigan, recently applied this methodology in ELP alignment studies with guidance from Dr. Cook. Wyoming is planning to use this methodology for a study in late 2005.

For these state alignment studies, committees of teachers were convened. These committees included teachers from every grade, kindergarten through grade 12. The general protocol for the ELP alignment process consists of several steps. First, teachers form committees based on grade span groups—early elementary, elementary, middle grades, and high school. Each committee familiarizes itself with the state ELP standards and assessment. Then, the committees assign Linguistic Difficulty Levels to the state ELP standards by consensus. Next, each individual committee member independently matches ELP test items to state ELP standards and identifies ELP test items' LDLs. Finally, the committees, as a group, link ELP test items to the state's content standards.

Conclusion

What are the implications of the resulting alignment? Several outcomes are expected: confirmation of the quality of assessment items and ELP standards, clarification of Linguistic Difficulty Levels in both standards and assessment items, and content validation of the ELP assessment. With this ELP alignment methodology, one significant unanswered question remains: what constitutes acceptable levels for alignment criteria? This critical question must be addressed in consideration of the facts of each state's unique situation, such as the English language learner population and the characteristics of the assessment system. This complex decision is dependent on these specifics and exceeds the scope of this paper. However, a state's criteria for an acceptable alignment can be determined through a thoughtful dialogue between the state assessment department and the states educators of English language learners. The continued cooperation of educators, policymakers, and assessment publishers can resolve these issues. The resulting assessments will provide the data necessary to improve instruction for English language learners so that they can attain the high levels of achievement that will contribute to a successful future for them and for the nation.

Table 1. Classifying Linguistic Difficulty Levels

Skill Areas		Linguistic Difficulty Levels		
		Level 1: Elementary Features	Level 2: Standard Constructions	Level 3: Complex Formulations
Oral/ Aural	Listening	Limited to a basic understanding of simple formulaic classroom and social discourse; attending to day-to-day brief and common language interactions	Basic understanding of and attending to everyday classroom and social discourse; common idiomatic expressions both in the classroom and in social situations and contexts	Understanding of and attending to more complex or specialized grade-appropriate discourse and interactions; comprehending contextualized and acculturated communications (e.g., ellipsis, comedy, parody)
	Speaking	Limited to a basic ability to produce formulaic expressions in standardized classroom and social situations	Facility to produce standard classroom and social discourse interactions using extended formulaic expressions as well as common idiomatic expressions	Facility to produce and interact within complex classroom and social discourse interactions utilizing more contextualized and acculturated forms and constructions
Textual	Reading	Limited to a basic facility to process and attend to English phonemic and alphabetic constructions; limited to a basic ability to comprehend high frequency grade-appropriate classroom and survival vocabulary items	Basic understanding of and ability to attend to standard everyday grade-appropriate texts, which include vocabulary and passages most commonly encountered in classroom and everyday social situations	Understanding of and attending to grade-appropriate vocabulary and texts; grade-level ability to comprehend classroom and socially appropriate texts
	Writing	Limited to a basic ability to copy and/or produce simple text constructions (e.g., letters, basic vocabulary items, name)	Basic ability to produce simple, grade-relevant classroom-based and/or social text utilizing standard vocabulary and grammatical features and constructions	Facility to produce grade-appropriate text constructions using appropriate vocabulary and grammatical features and constructions; ability to produce and express grade-appropriate ideas and concepts

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