Alignment to Assure Learning for ELL Students

"To help students achieve, we have to make sure they have the language skills necessary to engage meaningfully with academic content."

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Assessment & Standards Development Services

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Many students who are English language learners are not being taught the academic language skills they need to fully understand and respond to the questions asked on standardized tests.

That is one of the key findings emerging from a collaborative study aimed at improving the achievement of English language learner (ELL) students through better alignment between classroom instruction and state achievement standards and assessments.

"It has profound implications for how we interpret the results of large-scale assessments used for accountability purposes because it raises the question: What are we really testing?" according to WestEd's Edynn Sato, a principal investigator for the study. "How much of what we're measuring is a student's English language proficiency — in this case, the ability to understand a test question — versus the student's academic content knowledge and skills?"

During the 18-month study, researchers collected and analyzed standards and assessment data from nine states and surveyed teachers about their instructional practices with ELL students. Titled "Improving Methods of Aligning Instruction to Standards and Assessments for English Language Learners and Analyzing the Relationship of Alignment to Student Achievement," the study also provided participating states with technical assistance aimed at improving alignment and supporting the achievement of ELL students.

Gearing academic language instruction to content standards

Even a student who is proficient in conversational English may have difficulty learning academic English language without explicit instruction and frequent opportunities to practice. Academic language — typically used in instructional materials, in classroom activities, and in assessments — is a specialized form of language. Its mastery requires more than simply learning new vocabulary; students must also learn content-specific ways of structuring their speech — and their thinking.

For example, to report findings from a science experiment to classmates, students must use discipline-specific language such as "Our hypothesis was...," rather than "We thought probably ..."; or "The data we collected indicate ...," rather than "It looked to us like...."

There are several points along the path from content standards to assessment where academic language instruction may be neglected. As Sato points out, the fact that state content standards failed to include expectations for students' academic language learning accounted for much of the misalignment among standards, instruction, and assessment revealed in their study. Even when districts use standards-based curricula that include an academic language component, she adds, classroom practices may not adequately

address the skill. "We used teacher surveys to investigate the enacted curriculum, that is, the way curriculum is actually implemented in the classroom," Sato says, "and academic language wasn't necessarily being taught very explicitly or very well."

The study uncovered a notable gap between rigorous content standards and the instruction taking place in English language development (ELD) classes. "In the ELD classroom, the learning activities that students engaged in most often required basic language skills used for identifying, describing, or organizing information," Sato says. "But rigorous content standards and instruction, for example in mathematics and science, focus on more complex language skills, such as those students use to analyze or generalize. To help students achieve academically, we have to make sure the language skills taught in their ELD classes help them engage meaningfully with the content in their academic classes."

A tool previously developed by Sato and her colleagues proved useful for this study and may be useful to practitioners as well. The "Academic Language Demands and Language Complexity Taxonomy" describes general academic language functions necessary for skill mastery, ranging from basic to complex. Educators can use the taxonomy to determine the academic language skills necessary to meet specific content learning objectives. It also provides a common way for content and language specialists to categorize and discuss the language skills that students need in order to understand academic content and to demonstrate what they know.

Improving alignment of standards, assessment, and instruction

"States are facing new, expanded expectations for ELL students without the benefit of clear models and examples of effective practices on how to meet these expectations," says Sato, who directs Research and English Language Learner Assessment for WestEd's Assessment & Standards Development Services program. "So, the full validity of assessment scores for these populations continues to be questionable, as does the use of standardized test scores to document accountability for improving achievement."

According to Sato, teaching academic English language skills to ELL students is critical for two reasons: the "persistent and substantial" achievement gap between ELL students and their English-proficient peers, and the continuing growth of the nation's ELL population. The impetus for the collaborative study also can be traced to provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that require states to set standards for English proficiency related to academic achievement, and to document the progress of ELL students in mastering English language and core subjects.

Sato says she would like to see academic English language expectations explicitly addressed in state standards and curriculum guides, consistently incorporated across the content areas in classroom instruction, and appropriately reflected in assessments.

As a result of their involvement in the study, several states have already begun revising their content and language standards, incorporating academic English language expectations to support academic achievement. Others are creating professional development modules to help teachers identify and explicitly address the academic language needs of their students.

ELL students benefit, Sato says, when local school officials establish an environment in which the responsibility for educating this group is shared between English language and content area teachers. She suggests that schools support cross-disciplinary teams made up of ELD and content-area teachers who seek ways to systematically incorporate academic English language learning across the curriculum.

To ensure that happens, though, standards, instruction, and assessment need to be much more closely aligned. "At this point, the standards are not consistently articulating expectations for academic English language proficiency," says Sato. "And because standards are drivers of instruction and assessment, we are not only failing to give students opportunities to learn the language they need, but we're holding them accountable for knowledge to which they may not have access."

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the project's other principal investigators were from the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Center for Education Research, and EdCount, LLC. The project was led by the Iowa State Department of Education. Heading up WestEd's research team was Peter Worth, Senior Research Associate. A final report on study findings is expected in 2010.

For more information about the study "Improving Methods of Aligning Instruction to Standards and Assessments for English Language Learners and Analyzing the Relationship of Alignment to Student Achievement" or the "Academic Language Demands and Language Complexity Taxonomy," contact Edynn Sato at 415.615.3226 or esato@WestEd.org.

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