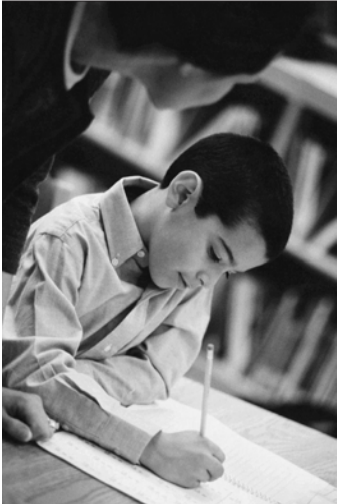


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Using formative assessment to monitor language proficiency

The results from both large-scale and classroom assessments should provide teachers with substantial information for determining the progress of their English language learners as they move toward the attainment of English language proficiency.

—Margo Gottlieb, *Assessing English Language Learners*, 2006

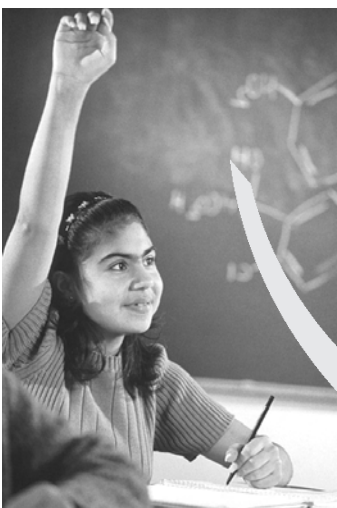


Progress monitoring was the topic of discussion at a recent meeting of the English Learner Collaborative, a group of Sonoma County teachers and specialists working together to improve instruction for second-language learners. How were these committed educators monitoring their students' developing language proficiency? What measures were they using and how frequently was student progress being assessed?

To begin the discussion, the meeting facilitator provided a one-page chart and asked the teachers to complete it by listing their assessment measures for English-language learners. On the right side of the page, they were to indicate how they were assessing English learners in the four core content areas. On the left side, they were to list their assessments for the four domains of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

The teachers had no problem completing the content assessment side of the chart. By including the California Standards Tests (CSTs), district benchmark assessments, subject-specific tests, in-class quizzes and assignments, and formative

For a complete and accurate picture of English learner performance, teachers need evidence of both language proficiency and content learning



assessments like DIBELS, they showed they were using a full complement of tools to monitor their students' developing academic skill and knowledge.

On the language side of the page, the teachers included the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) as an annual summative assessment, but indicated they were using few, if any, other assessments to monitor students' language learning. In short, they had no clear assessment strategy or day-to-day progress monitoring schedule for language proficiency.

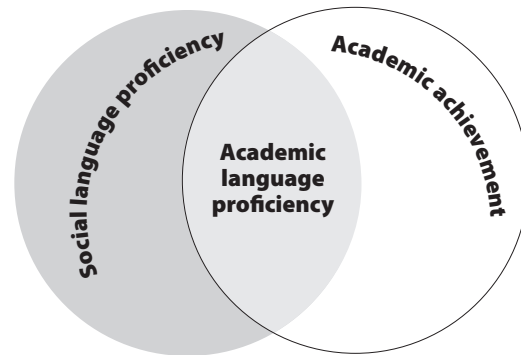
This activity revealed a void that exists in many classrooms serving English-language learners and underscored the critical need to incorporate language-focused assessments into the instructional programs that serve these students. What is the value of a stepped-up assessment schedule? Frequent checks of developing language proficiency will clarify what students know, what they have misunderstood, and what needs further reinforcement to advance language proficiency. With this information in hand, teachers can make appropriate instructional adjustments—re-teaching, trying alternative instructional approaches, or offering more opportunities for practice—that will result in increased language learning and help meet the goal of ensuring that students acquire English as rapidly as possible.

The importance of monitoring language proficiency

In recent years, accountability initiatives have alerted teachers to the wide academic achievement gap between English learners and English-proficient students. As a result, educators are finding themselves increasingly motivated to improve instructional delivery in ways that heighten English learner achievement. They have incorporated more vocabulary instruction, new engagement strategies, and additional speaking opportunities into their lessons. They have differentiated instruction and made English Language Development (ELD) programs more explicit. These instructional techniques are helping, but there is still a long way to go before the achievement gap is sufficiently narrowed.

Current theory and practice have shown that, to be successful in school, English-language learners must

acquire the social and academic aspects of language *as they are learning content*. Author and researcher Margo Gottlieb has illustrated the relationship between language and academic learning using this diagram:



She maintains that academic language proficiency and academic achievement go hand-in-hand, but that it's important to distinguish the academic function of language (that is, the language that's needed to process, understand, and communicate curriculum-based content) from the academic skills and knowledge that underlie that communication. In her book, she highlights the difference between academic achievement targets and language proficiency targets like this:

| Academic Achievement Target | Language Proficiency Target |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Measure objects with a ruler | Compare size of objects using superlatives |
| Name and locate state capitals | Describe what you might see in a capital city |
| Produce a timeline according to dates of events | Use sequential language to identify points on a timeline |
| Recite the alphabet | Give examples of where to find letters of the alphabet |
| Find the perimeter of a room | Select furniture for a room based on perimeter and justify choices |
| Classify chemical compounds by presence or absence of oxygen | Discuss why oxygen is important to our lives |

Gottlieb believes that teachers must be able to *differentiate the language requirements of their instruction from the subject matter content*. Then, for a complete and accurate picture of English learner performance, they must obtain ongoing evidence of *both* their language proficiency and their content learning. This means that teachers must view language proficiency and academic achievement as partners in the education of English-

language learners and be familiar with the language proficiency standards, as well as academic content standards. They must understand how language learning proceeds in a continuum described by the five CELDT proficiency levels and know exactly what they need to teach to advance students through this continuum.

Formative assessment is key in this regard. The goal of this type of assessment is to gain understanding of what students know (and don't know) in order to make responsive changes in teaching and learning. When integrated into daily classroom practice, formative assessment provides the information teachers need to adjust instruction and learning *while it is happening*. These adjustments help ensure that students achieve targeted learning goals within a set time frame. Incorporating formative assessment into the instructional process for language learning will lead to improved instruction and greater gains in language proficiency among students.

Feedback can be a type of formative assessment

When we drive to a new destination, we need to know where we're going. We get feedback along the way from signs and landmarks that confirm we're headed in the right direction and making progress. A mile marker or exit sign along the highway informs us that we're approaching our destination.

Formative assessments provide a similar type of information about students. Are they headed in the right direction and making progress?

In-class checks for understanding, accuracy, and consistent skills demonstration of language objectives are an example of how teachers can integrate ongoing assessment in their instructional programs for English-language learners. In fact, teachers can gather assessment data from the actual instructional activities of their lessons as they work to uncover what students know, what they don't know, and what they have misunderstood.

This idea is explored by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in the November 2009 issue of *Educational Leadership*. Their article "Feed Up, Back, Forward" highlights the use of a strong feedback

system as formative assessment and describes how the three components of that system can effectively lift student achievement. This concept applies not only to academic achievement, but also to developing English language proficiency.

The first component they discuss is establishing clear lesson objectives, then "feeding up" the lesson objectives to students by telling them what they will be expected to learn. When students understand the expectations, they are more likely to focus on the tasks at hand and meet learning goals. A lesson that begins with a clearly stated goal results in more students meeting that goal and retaining the resultant learning.

In an English Language Development (ELD) class,

Gottlieb and Fisher will present at Feb 18 conference in Santa Rosa

The Sonoma County Office of Education will host its annual Administrator ELL Conference on February 18, 2010 and the two experts cited in this publication will be featured presenters.

Margo Gottlieb, Ph.D., is a nationally recognized specialist in the design of assessments for English-language learners in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 settings and the development of English language proficiency standards. Her keynote presentation on using a language curriculum framework for standards-based instruction will open the conference.

Douglas Fisher, Ph.D., is a professor of language and literacy education in the Department of Teacher Education at San Diego State University. His presentation will focus on literacy for English learners and the role of academic conversations in English learner instruction.

Breakout sessions will highlight strategies for engaging student thinking, building capacity for English learner achievement, "good to great" instruction, and results of a Sonoma County best practices grant supporting language acquisition through the use of graphic organizers. Information about the conference is available at www.scoe.org. ♦

a teacher might begin a 30-minute lesson by saying, “Today we will learn two new vocabulary words—*depend* and *consumer*—and use these words along with other vocabulary in meaningful and grammatically correct sentences. You’ll use the sentence frames that are here on the board, or you can design your own sentences. You’ll be working with a partner to ask and answer questions that describe what different community workers do for families.” Right away, students will know that their

Teachers should know exactly what they need to teach to advance students through the CELDT continuum

lesson includes vocabulary practice, using the model sentences, and partnering with other students to learn about community service.

By giving English learners this up-front information,

teachers are alerting students to the learning that’s ahead. Having a clearly stated purpose for language learning also helps teachers plan instruction that supports students in reaching the learning goal.

“Feeding back,” the second component of Fisher and Frey’s comprehensive feedback system, refers to the individual responses teachers give students about their work. Through these responses, students learn if they are progressing toward the lesson objective. When used for formative assessment, the feedback that teachers provide should directly relate to the learning goal and help lead students toward attainment of that goal.

In the ELD class mentioned above, the teacher provided feedback when the students were working with partners. The assignment she gave the class was to use the new vocabulary words in sentence frames. This required the students to speak and understand the meaning of the new words while providing opportunities to practice sentence structure and pronoun-verb agreement.

The teacher began by introducing the new vocabulary word *depend*. She pronounced the word, asked the students to repeat it, wrote it on the board,

and defined it. Next, she modeled it in a sentence using the frames she had written on the board:

- I depend on _____.
He/She/They/It _____.

The first sentence, the teacher explained, would name who or what you depend on and the second sentence would tell how they help you. For example:

- I depend on *my husband*.
He *fixes dinner on the nights I get home late*.
- I depend on *the bus*.
It *gets me to school on time*.

“Depend is when you rely on someone or something to help you,” she explained. “Say it again: depend.”

Next, the teacher led the class in creating a word bank of people they depend on. She provided another sample sentence, using the frame and reviewing how to select the appropriate pronoun and verb ending. “I depend on my parents. They drive me to school.”

Each student then worked with a partner to use the sentence frame to tell of one or more family members they rely on. If they finished one example, they were to use the words in the word bank to develop additional sentences.

As the students practiced, the teacher moved around the room and listened for correct word usage. She stopped at one pair of students, restating their example and telling them that they had correctly completed the sentence. At another table, she heard a student say, “I depend on my sisters. They helps me go shopping.” Here, the teacher said, “I know you have two sisters and you used the correct pronoun, *they*. This means you must use the verb form that goes with *they*. You should say, ‘I depend on my sisters. They *help* me go shopping.’ Say it with me.... Now tell me again, why do you depend on your sisters?”

In this lesson, the teacher found that several students made pronoun-verb agreement errors, while others were having difficulty selecting the appropriate pronoun. This observation informed the teacher that pronoun use was not yet a proficiently used language form for these students. Re-teaching and more targeted practice at another time would be required.

This leads to the third component of the compre-

hensive feedback system that Fisher and Frey describe—using the information collected while teachers are providing feedback *to plan future instruction*. They maintain that this aspect of the feedback system is often left out, but that it is essential. They call the use of feedback to modify and enhance instruction “feeding forward.”

Using formative assessment to pinpoint language levels

Other types of formative assessment can be used in conjunction with “feeding up, back, and forward” to ascertain student movement on the language proficiency continuum defined by the CELDT. This means that teachers must first have a good understanding of the five CELDT language proficiency levels and know each student’s current level from the last test administration or other more recent testing. Most importantly, teachers must be able to identify the language skills each student

needs to learn in order to advance to the next level of language proficiency.

A progress monitoring checklist of essential skills within the language proficiency levels is a helpful tool in this regard. But because language learning is so complex, some of these checklists are long and detailed. Teachers may find them difficult to use if what they need is a streamlined system that’s easy to implement and fits with existing classroom practices.

One version of a simplified checklist that is being piloted by Sonoma County teachers is shown in the sample *Language Forms by Language Levels* chart below, which illustrates a Level 2 checklist. Using a tool like this, a teacher could start the school year by listing all English learners at their approximate CELDT level based on end-of-year language assessments from the prior school year (or prior year CELDT results if a more recent assessment is not available). Using formative assessments during the first weeks of school, the teacher would then verify student mastery of the verb forms and parts of speech

Language Forms by Language Levels: Sample Checklist

Level 2: Early Intermediate

This chart, aligned to the Early Intermediate CELDT level, itemizes the language skills and knowledge students must master to achieve proficiency at this level. Once students have demonstrated mastery of the verb forms and parts of speech listed, the teacher will move their names to the Level 3 chart and provide instruction aligned to the language forms for that level.

| | Student 1 | Student 2 | Student... |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Verb Study | | | |
| ■ Interrogatives for present tense – <i>are you? do you?</i> | | | |
| ■ Past progressive – <i>was, were + ing</i> | | | |
| ■ Future – <i>will, going to</i> | | | |
| Parts of Speech | | | |
| ■ Objective pronouns – <i>him, her, me, us</i> | | | |
| ■ Contractions – <i>don't, isn't, aren't</i> | | | |
| ■ Irregular plurals – <i>teeth, sheep</i> | | | |
| ■ Possessive adjectives – <i>his, her, our, their</i> | | | |
| ■ Conjunctions – <i>and, but</i> – with sentences | | | |
| ■ Comparatives and superlatives – <i>-er, -est</i> | | | |
| ■ Possessive marker – <i>'s, s', its</i> | | | |

for that level, re-teaching or providing opportunities to practice as needed.

Once a student is known to be proficient in all the language skills for that level, the teacher adds the student's name to the checklist for the next higher level. Instruction is provided on that level's verb forms and parts of speech. Using formative assessments and anecdotal observations from classroom participation, the teacher tracks student progress on the chart. For example, the teacher might

Formative assessment provides the information teachers need to adjust instruction and learning while it is happening

add a plus or minus each time a student uses the listed verb tense correctly—or incorrectly—when assessed and look for repeated instances of correct usage (say 4 out of 5 times). In this way, the teacher can quickly and easily see if students are acquiring

the specific language skills that will advance them to the next level of the CELDT continuum. Based on this information, the teacher is also better able to focus instruction on specific student needs.

Checklists like this can be used in conjunction with a variety of formative assessments, including commercially available ones like the QIA or Quick Informal Assessment developed by Connie Williams (now published by Ballard & Tighe) or ADEPT, A Developmental English Proficiency Test, from the California Reading and Literature Project.

Another assessment recording tool developed by the Sonoma County Office of Education and now being piloted by the English Learner Collaborative is also proving helpful to teachers. This tool, pictured on the following page, can be used to help create a running record of a student's developing language skills. Using a ladder-like continuum of language skills that extends from CELDT level 1 to 5, the tool shows a learning progression in the areas of sentence complexity, verb

usage, and levels of thinking. As teachers listen to individual students speak, they mark or circle what they hear in language usage and make notes of any language form errors. They also listen for the levels of thinking students display in their conversation. This is important because it encourages teachers to focus instruction on the language syntax that students need to support expression of the higher levels of thinking required for academic success.

Students would be informally assessed throughout the school year on at least a quarterly basis, with the teacher recording results on the chart. The same recording sheet can be used over time, with new marks and notations added in a different color to capture those areas where the student is progressing—or struggling—in language proficiency.

Note that students may not move along the continuum in a precise sequence, but may have gaps in learning or skip to skills generally thought to be at a higher level. For example, a teacher might find that a Level 2 (early intermediate) student has mastered past tense, but not the use of modals. This tool provides a way to record these observations and to monitor students' developing language proficiency.

Ellen Giunchigliani, a second-grade teacher at Waldo Rohnert School in Rohnert Park, uses the recording tool in conjunction with her trimester “running record” for reading. To develop a running record, she works one-on-one with a student for five to ten minutes several times per year to assess growth in reading. For this quick assessment, she uses a short leveled reading selection, a few comprehension questions, and her own note-taking technique. As the student reads the selection, Giunchigliani notes any reading errors. When the reading is complete, she asks the student to respond to the comprehension questions. From this brief interaction, she is able to ascertain the student's current instructional reading level compared to the last running record assessment. She has also learned what additional instruction this particular student needs.

Giunchigliani uses the context of this reading assessment to engage the English learners in her class in an extended conversation. In order to assess progress in English language use, she might ask the student to relate the situation in the reading to his/her own life

Formative Assessment Recording Tool

Student _____ Fall CELDT Level _____ Date(s) _____

| CELDT Level | Sentence Complexity | Verb Usage | Levels of Thinking |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Phrases | Present progressive He is eating. | Confirm |
| 2 | | Simple present The dog barks. | |
| | 3 | Command Go. Stop. Wait. | Recall |
| Modals (simple) Can, may, could, must | | | |
| 4 | Simple sentences | Interrogatives with simple present or present progressive Are you sitting? Does he swim? | Explain |
| | | Past progressive Was, were + ing ... He was walking. | |
| 5 | Compound sentences | Future Will, going to | Apply |
| | | Past Verb + ed (regular) and some irregular | |
| 3 | Compound sentences | Interrogatives for past Did you? Didn't she? | Interpret |
| | | Present perfect Have, has + past participle He has jumped. | |
| 4 | Complex sentences | Past perfect Had + past participle ... He had studied. | Justify |
| | | Conditional If + modal If the rain stops, I will go outside. | |
| 5 | Compound-complex sentences | Phrasal Two- or three-part verb phrases We ran away. He backed down the road. | Analyze |
| | | Passive voice The bike was stolen. | |
| 5 | Compound-complex sentences | Present, past, future "perfect progressive" Have been, had been, will have been + ing | Evaluate |
| | | Modals (complex) Ought to, would rather | |
| | | | Generalize |
| | | | Create |



At Waldo Rohmert School, teacher Ellen Giunchigliani combines the trimester running record of Damari Carmona Ramirez's growth in reading with a quick formative assessment of language proficiency.

experiences. Then, using the recording tool pictured on page 7, she makes notes of the sentence structure used, verb tense, and levels of thinking. She may strategically structure her prompts to elicit a particular verb tense or word usage that she wants to check for accuracy. She also references a simple matrix of English learner competencies to ensure that student responses are reflective of the language skills for the CELDT level

Learn more about developing lessons with overt language objectives

Our January 2009 Aiming High Resource brief highlighted the topic of *Developing and Delivering Lessons with Overt Language Objectives*. We've now supplemented this print publication with two online videos that show teachers delivering the lessons they developed using the lesson plan format we described.

One video features an ELD lesson for kindergarten students on singular and plural nouns. The other video shows a science-focused SDAIE lesson for fifth-grade students. Here, students learn to describe and sequence a narrative about multi-cell organisms.

Find these resources online at www.scoe.org. ♦

and that they are making progress toward the next level.

"As students read the selection, I make notes of how words are pronounced and what mistakes are made," explains Giunchigliani. "I write the children's answers to the comprehension questions verbatim, then use the information to target instruction. During the first running record in September, I also find out how much each student speaks English at home, which family members they can speak English to, and if anyone reads to them in English. It's helpful to know if school is the only place where they are using English."

The extended "talking time" that Giunchigliani dedicates to her English learners may add a couple of minutes per student to the running record assessment, but it gives her invaluable information: an individualized record of language growth and a focus for further instruction tailored to the needs of her students.

While STAR, CAHSEE, and SAT scores make local and national headlines, the assessments that really drive instruction occur every day in classrooms where teachers make decisions based on the direct and immediate feedback of formative assessments. For English-language learners, an activity as simple as retelling a story, engaging in a conversation, or writing about one's family can help teachers monitor student progress and modify instruction so that students can make greater language gains. Tools designed to help structure this progress monitoring not only provide an easy way to record student advancement in language learning, they also assist teachers by summarizing what students need to learn to advance on the CELDT continuum and become proficient English speakers. ♦

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