

Success with ELLs

ELLs at the Center: Rethinking High- Stakes Testing

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The unfortunate irony of current education reforms is that English Language Learners are disproportionately being “left behind.”

—*Kate Menken,*

*English Learners Left Behind:
Standardized Testing
as Language Policy*

English language learners are expected to acquire academic language proficiency during their first year in the United States at a rate that mirrors the fast-moving, high-tech, multimodal society they live in. This expectation dismisses the vast research on second language acquisition that states that on average, under the best of circumstances, it takes five to seven years to master cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP; Collier, “How Long”).

One of the results of the high-stakes testing environment in

Massachusetts (i.e., Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) is an unconscious impatience with student learning. The accountability data being used to assess teacher effectiveness and student learning are leaving one group of students sadly behind: ELLs (Menken). In addition to the traditional immigrant and transient language learners, also consider the plight of students learning Standard English as a second dialect for students whose home language is significantly different from the CALP that is needed to be successful at school. Traditional immigrants refer to students learning English, such as Russian speakers or Haitian Creole speakers, but the latter group are those who speak a non-standard dialect of English at home such as African Americans or speakers of Appalachian English. Inevitably, all of these groups are at risk in our current climate of accountability and standardized testing (Menken; Tung and Uriarte) due to the required CALP, which is the kind of mastery that standardized tests demand as well as the academic language needed to access school curricula.

A Painful Journey

Learning a language can be a long and arduous journey, and there is a

lot of pressure on teachers to get students ready for standardized tests quickly. As content teachers feel the pressure of the test, our colleagues have shared that they unwittingly tend to use traditional chalk and talk methods to move through the curriculum and ensure material is covered. The allure to teach to the test becomes irresistible. “Because of the high-stakes consequences attached to standardized tests in combination with consistently lower test scores among ELLs, the tests greatly impact the instruction and educational experiences of ELLs” (Menken 4). Traditional methods and teaching to the test are notoriously

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ineffective with language learners. Test-driven education reduces “the quality of education the ELLs receive” (Menken 137). In addition, there is a tendency to simply correct student work rather than to use more interactive and critical methods of discovery and collaboration. Therefore, the urge to correct forces teachers to participate in a culture of correction: to correct students’ errors from the

beginning to achieve the established social standards of what is perceived as correct English.

How do we prepare students with the necessary skills to compete in a society and marketplace driven by a global economy? How do we nurture students' emotional side and cultivate their intellectual curiosity in an era of accountability and high-stakes testing? How do we validate and celebrate students' cultures, language diversity, and multiple literacies in times of stringent accountability that tend to delineate a particular outcome? These questions do not have simplistic and straightforward answers, for they are complex and multilayered. However, as teacher leaders we must continue to work collaboratively with colleagues, parents, students, and community organizations among other stakeholders to advocate for equitable education in spite of the pressures inflicted by educational and language policies (Diaz-Rico and Weed).

Responsive Practices

As classroom teachers, advocates, and professional development facilitators, we suggest a variety of strategies and approaches to address these questions, some of which could be addressed from the micro level of the classroom. For example, we believe in adopting an inclusive and critical pedagogy in which classrooms and teaching practices harmonize and sustain a social justice philosophy. Classrooms should be physical places of healthy contentions in which teachers, *who have high expectations for all students*, engage students in ongoing dialogue and

reflections through a variety of modes: reading, writing, debating, and listening. In such classrooms there is time and space for voices to be heard, understood, challenged, and validated in a welcoming and safe environment (Delpit; Freire; Gay; Ladson-Billings; Nieto; Shor).

But the reality for many classroom teachers in assessing language learners' writing, for instance, is the tendency to correct every error to the point of what

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Rei R. Noguchi calls using "red ink to the fatal hemorrhage" (13). A learner's interlanguage is a representation of both the native language and the target language, and a learner simply cannot make use of so much correction in the early stages of language learning. It serves mainly to discourage and silence the voices of young writers. Similarly, speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Spanglish, for example, are often reminded at school that their home languages are wrong and in need of correction—more red ink.

While Standard English is the language of school and the lingua franca of peoples and commerce, teachers can help children understand the power of their home language, whether it is African American Vernacular English, Puerto Rican Spanish including Spanglish, or any other variation

of any language; it has the power, efficiency, and complexity of all human languages and should not be viewed as intellectually inferior (Labov; Stavans). Amy Tan speaks to this in her essay, "Mother Tongue."

I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as "simple"; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as "broken"; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as "watered down"; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts. (201–02)

It is our experience that when teachers honor both oral and written home languages in school, they validate the child's point of power in learning; thus, academic investment is most likely to occur. Then students are willing to understand that Standard English is the language of social capital and the importance of adding it to their already-sophisticated home language. They have the resources to transfer their mastery of their home dialect or first language to the task of learning a new language. Their mother tongue is not wrong or in need of correction; it is the learning and application of the standard language that requires multiple opportunities,

experiences, and practice with the language. It may be challenging work that requires the willingness to make and accept mistakes, but students are starting from a position of strength and power when their home language is honored at school as they learn and adopt the new language.

Achievable Goals

To alleviate the pressures of the high-stakes testing environment, teachers should consider the use of low-stakes writing such as freewriting and writing-to-learn activities (Elbow). We refer to the kind of activities that provide students with opportunities to communicate and express ideas free of judgment and corrections. Students should have a choice of which language or dialect they use to complete such activities. It is important to keep in mind that the ultimate goal is for students to become strong readers and writers as well as critical thinkers and decision-makers (Freire; Nieto; Shor). That is, if students are given the opportunity to use the language closest to their hearts, the one that connects to who they are and their gifts to the world, they may be willing to take risks and engage in writing processes to accomplish a desired outcome—whether it is an essay, poem, or presentation. Lynne T. Diaz-Rico and Kathryn Z. Weed claim that “the primary language is seen as a worthy subject for instruction and as a means by which students can acquire knowledge” (264).

An additional way to lighten the high-stakes testing environment is for teachers to assume a leadership role in the field of edu-

cation. There are multiple and influential ways in which teachers can broaden their understanding of teaching English language learners. Adopting a variety of collaborative and engaging practices to advocate for students, parents, and the teaching field in general will enhance a teacher’s vantage point in assuming leadership roles. There are simple and more elaborated ways to get involved. It is important, however, to understand one’s reality to choose the level of involvement one is capable of taking on. Collaborating with colleagues, sharing resources, expertise, and planning instruction; being a mentor teacher, team, or department chair; becoming a union representative, a parent-teacher partner, or a thinking partner on a particular initiative to a member of a leadership team, a professional development facilitator, or an advisor for after-school clubs (Diaz-Rico and Weed): These are among the many ways teachers can move their advocacy role beyond the micro level of the classrooms and gain great insight that can in turn inform and enhance teaching and learning.

Discovering Home Language

In conclusion, we offer an invitation to teachers to join us in discovering students’ home languages and cultural backgrounds, to unleash the power of those languages and dialects in freewrites and writing-to-learn activities, to listen to their words and enter their worlds, and to advocate and take on leadership roles. Amid the pressures of today’s high-

stakes testing environment, by using these approaches, we see students meeting their academic challenges in our classrooms. We want to hear students’ voices in home languages, in interlanguage,

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and in Standard English by providing classroom environments that foster the harmony of multiple perspectives. These environments can include examples of writing in dialects other than Standard English, such as some of the work of Langston Hughes. And then as the students become surer of themselves, they become academically stronger, and they transcend the classroom walls and move out into the hallways, onto the bulletin boards, into anthologies, into communities, and into the larger world. Finally, those voices will be heard clearly and triumphantly on the standardized state tests.

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