

## Language Proficiency Testing or Assessment Tools and Practices

Before we can begin to understand why there are and have been issues with language proficiency testing and the instruments used to assess English language proficiency, the historical attitude towards language and culture in the United States must be considered carefully. It can be argued that as long as an attitude exists and is encouraged by political leadership this attitude can serve as a powerful influence on the thoughts and decisions of a large number of parents, students, teachers, and other members of our society. At the same time, it is essential to point out that the same language that needs to be tested, assessed, and taught to the masses of people in this country, also needs to be scrutinized. This process of scrutiny is vital to attain careful and critical understanding of the language used by the powerful political and economical lobbyists in order to avoid becoming manipulated or entrapped by hidden messages in their language that are designed to control our thoughts and decisions. This paper is devoted to exploring the historical attitude reflected in the United States toward language that causes and has caused issues with language proficiency testing and assessment of limited English speaking students and how this attitude can be challenged by those of us who serve as teachers in our system of public schools.

Federal governmental policies have been evolving in the United States for many years because there is a long history of evidence that points to the discriminatory treatment of people who do speak English with an accent or do not fit the socio-economic or physical image of the dominant societal Caucasian group. The pattern of abuse seems to travel in a vicious cycle that can begin with the anger and resentment that can be fostered in the culturally or linguistically different group suffering the affects of the discriminatory treatment by the hands of the dominant group. As that marginalized group continues to live in the environment of the United States while completing the process of acculturation and assimilation, they give up the culture and language of their home country, but gain a slightly higher position in this society. During this process the group that had experienced the terrible taste of discriminatory treatment perhaps continues the vicious cycle by then directing their anger and resentment at another culturally and linguistically diverse group of newcomers. However, it can be pointed out in the

environment of the United States, those members of minority groups who are physically different from the dominant culture as a result of racial background will still continue to suffer the terrible taste of discriminatory treatment. Despite this harmful and dangerous cycle of behavior, there is a desire in the environment of the United States, within our systems of public schools for an improvement in educational equity. The outcry for this equity reflects the history of those who have been discriminated against on the basis of characteristics including race, national origin, gender, disability, and economic status (González, Brusca-Vega, Yawkey, 1997, pg. 31).

Those of us who serve as teachers in the public schools represent a societal army fighting on the frontlines to provide appropriate education to culturally and linguistically diverse students, as long as we can maintain enough inner strength and determination to make a positive difference in the lives of our students and their families who have suffered discriminatory treatment. In addition to the teachers, though, the cause requires more involvement and support from other groups. There is a history of legislative actions that have served as the backbone of appropriate education for culturally and linguistically diverse students in the United States.

As far back as the 1920's and continuing until the 1960's, English immersion policies were the dominant method of instruction for language minority students here in the United States. Few or no remedial services were available, students were generally held at the same grade level until enough English was mastered to advance in subject areas, and no federal policies actually existed (NCELA, et al, 2003, pg. 1). In contrast, an example of a grass-roots effort initiated by a culturally or linguistically diverse group clearly indicates what can be accomplished with the desire to overcome discriminatory treatment or oppression through racism. Thanks to the efforts of the African American community, the lawyers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) successfully argued against racial segregation in schools in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 (González, et al, 1997, pg. 31). In addition to this important decision and, perhaps as a result of this decision, a national study of the lack of educational equity was conducted. However, the Coleman Report of 1966 was just the beginning and the debate over the concept of educational equity still continues today.

As a member of the faculty of a community college I have witnessed the unique needs of our growing and changing multi-cultural and multi-linguistic student body. The community college arena seems to be an appropriate place for students to acquire an understanding of civic engagement through democratization. Where else can so many students attend classes and work towards gaining an education to change their lives with so many people who have been historically marginalized? However, the harsh reality is that despite the fact that the opportunities and support students receive in school can have a tremendous impact on their ability to contribute to society economically later on, due to the unique needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse population, patterns of discrimination still persist (González, et al, 1997, pg. 32). As teachers we have to learn to become advocates for our students and their families if there is any hope of altering the lingering, harmful attitudes that poison impressionable minds. We must become well versed in the language of the economically and politically powerful influences in the United States. I clearly recall hearing arguments between teachers and other members of my community when Question Two was under debate. The number of educated people who I encountered who seemed to believe that bilingual education meant teaching public school students all of their course material in a foreign language shocked me.

However, back in 1963 a positive influence was created by the success of a two-way bilingual program for Cuban refugee children in Dade County, Florida that inspired the implementation of similar educational programs elsewhere in this country (NCELA, et. al, 2003, pg. 1). The positive influence was the result of another viewpoint toward a particular minority group. Since the Cuban community was largely professional it was also politically favored and perceived differently. The national attention that this group received for their highly successful two-way bilingual program did not harm their community image or their political favoritism. It can be argued that the Dade County case is an example of a rare occurrence because all too often instead of providing programs of educational enrichment that could uplift the culturally and linguistically diverse learners who have been marginalized by discriminatory treatment, their educational programs have been perceived negatively. The perception of the bilingual programs is a belief that their program is designed for those who are disadvantaged. This perception produces a deficit mentality that is reflected in the racially discriminative

attitudes of many Americans who have forgotten that their ancestors were once members of marginalized groups who were culturally and linguistically different from the dominant group. The results are an unhealthy educational climate for the immigrant group, simply because they are limited in their English proficiency skills. The battle against the inequities in education for culturally and linguistically diverse students seem impossible, until we remember the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and what can be accomplished in the United States with federal funds.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits racial and sexual discrimination as well as discrimination on the basis of national origin by any program or activity receiving federal funding (González, et. al, 1997, pg. 34). This concept of threatening to withhold funding as a result of disobeying laws continued with the Bilingual Education Act, also known as Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968. This act established federal policy for bilingual education for economically disadvantaged language minority students, allocated funds for innovative programs, and recognized the unique educational disadvantages faced by non-English speaking students (NCELA, et al, 2003, pg. 1). It seems that the incentives provided by offers for competitive funding reappeared in 1978 with the reauthorization of Title VII that included protection for students who were limited in their ability to write as well as speak English. It was at this time that the deficit mentality labeling of the terms altered from limited English speaking ability to limited English proficiency. It was recommended that the linguistically diverse students be served with appropriate bilingual education programs in the United States.

It can be argued that at times the mandates of the federal laws, even with their funding incentives, are still not strong enough to redirect a negative attitude toward an improvement in attitude. At those times, as stated before, in addition to the federal governmental support and funding civic engagement and grass-roots efforts must be encouraged. The suit brought by Chinese parents in San Francisco in 1974 can illustrate an example of the power of civic engagement. The *Lau v. Nichols* case led to the Supreme Court ruling that identical education did not constitute equal education under the Civil Rights Act (NCELA, et. al, 2003, pg. 1). Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunity Act that extended the *Lau* decision to all schools mandating that school districts must take affirmative steps to overcome educational barriers faced by

non-English speakers. These important legal developments occurred as a result of the decision to take action made by certain members of the San Francisco Chinese community. Again, the message is clear, in order to change the lingering negative attitude toward culturally and linguistically diverse students, teachers, parents, and community activists are needed to advocate on behalf of the students who are on the receiving end of the negative discriminatory treatment.

In addition to being familiar with the past and current issues and instruments in language proficiency testing in order to serve as an advocate for students and their parents, teachers must also be sufficiently familiar with the major theoretical approaches to language assessment. Without this knowledge, the linguistically and culturally diverse students can be kept in a very risky situation as a result of being inappropriately diagnosed with learning disabilities. At the same time, teachers can be kept in a very risky situation if they are not knowledgeable of the theoretical approaches to language assessment. Some mistakes that harm the educational progress of a student can be very difficult to overcome. In fact, presently, educators can face a complex decision when they assess, diagnose, and place culturally and linguistically diverse students due to the presence of methodological, educational, and theoretical problems (González, et. al, 1997, pg. 56). It is critical for teachers to raise their awareness and to become responsible in their knowledge of the psycholinguistic theories that explain how culturally and linguistically students develop. Adding to the difficulty of assessment is the difficulty of differentiating disabilities from normal second-language learning in culturally and linguistically diverse students. There is a well-known major assessment principle that recommends diagnoses, placements, and instructional decisions be based on a battery of measures coming from multiple sources and areas of information. Evaluators need to use a multidimensional battery of standardized tests and other qualitative measures for assuring an accurate assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse students (González, et al, 1997, pg. 57). In fact, it is recommended by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 that a multidisciplinary team participate in the assessment and diagnostic process of the development of an individualized educational program and placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students. These particular evaluations should be administered in the child's native language. They should be

validated for the purposes that will be used (screening, diagnosis, placement, or development of an IEP). Trained personnel in accordance with administration procedures should administer the evaluations. Finally, they should include assessment in all areas of educational need (González, et al, 1997, pg. 57). The goal to keep in mind through this process is to try to avoid the high risk of mislabeling because it can bring very harmful social, ethical, and educational consequences.

Another major methodological problem involves the psychometric properties of standardized tests that can result in the correlation between cognitive and linguistic processes in measure of language proficiency, academic achievement, and verbal and nonverbal intelligence. In fact, most tasks included in assessment instruments of first and second-language proficiency and academic achievement do not only measure linguistic skills, but cognitive processes included as intelligence measures (González, et al, 1997, pg. 60). As a result, most intelligence and achievement measures can underestimate the intellectual potential of culturally and linguistically diverse students, especially when they have limited English proficiency. Once again, it has to be pointed out that underestimating the intellectual potential of these students can reflect an attitude of low expectations that some educators hold. Having low expectations for the culturally and linguistically diverse students can result again in the deficit mentality. An attitude reflecting low expectations needs to be changed by raising the teachers' awareness.

Through writing this paper and revisiting the historical account of the marginalized groups of people's struggles in this country, I have realized the role powerful and valuable information can play. Teachers need to know about the people who wanted equal access to educational opportunity and equitable outcomes because this information is key to raising awareness. Now that I am being trained for my new position at NSCC as the tutor coordinator and I have the responsibility for preparing and presenting in-service training workshops, I am looking for this type of an awakening experience in educators (González, et al, 1997, pg. 62). This workshop has to have a very powerful component for the learning to occur because real change can only happen if the educators realize that the most important tool for assessment is their own personality. In addition, we will have to learn to expose misconceptions and myths. One of these myths is the belief that language proficiency is the only sign of intelligence. This means that

some people hold the belief that culturally and linguistically diverse students who are in the process of learning English are less intelligent than monolingual students who are native English speakers. The challenge of changing attitudes seems endless, however, there is a contemporary approach in teacher training that can accomplish even more.

The ethnic researcher approach takes into account the cultural and linguistic diversity of students. The first principle of this approach assumes that individuals have potentials that can be actualized or expressed differently in various sociocultural environments (González, et al, 1997, pg. 82). In order to complete an assessment within the ethnic researcher approach it is essential to collect information describing the external factors that are considered key for the diagnosis. As a result, a multidisciplinary team of evaluators conducts this information collection. By examining the students' performance across settings, erroneous interpretations of that performance can be reduced (González, et al, 1997, pg. 82). In addition, a second principle of the ethnic researcher approach assumes that the learner's potentials are unlimited and fixed values cannot be assigned. I can imagine the beginning of a positive attitude change within a teacher who has been exposed to the training of the ethnic researcher approach. Assessment is focused on the process as the student's learning strategies, developmental stage, and learning potential are described as the third principle. As a result, the ethnic researcher approach is constructivistic because it assumes that development occurs due to the interaction of internal and external factors (González, et al, 1997, pg. 82). An explanation of the term constructivistic involves the diagnostic process demanding deep knowledge of the constructs being evaluated. The description of ethnic researchers seems to reflect the positive attitude change that is needed by so many teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students because the ethnic researchers accept the challenge of understanding these students by keeping a genuine interest in validating the experience of growing up in a culturally diverse environment. Since I had this type of childhood experience, the description of the ethnic researcher approach is so refreshing to me. However, I wonder, what else does a teacher need to know to be able to understand the power of language proficiency testing or assessment?

Another idea for an in-service training workshop for the tutors and faculty at NSCC can include skills on how to link assessment with instruction and how to instruct

the culturally and linguistically diverse learners in our student population. In relation to the goal of linking assessment with instruction, Yawkey and Juan (1993) have proposed several strategies that include observation, determination of the student's level of development, individualization, developmental language, directed dialogue, and family potential. To further explain, by using structured and natural observations, teachers can identify strengths and weaknesses, interests, and conceptual and problem-solving levels of students' understanding and performance across many contexts and along an extended period of time (González, et al, 1997, pg. 140). Keeping this description in mind, teachers should also learn to individualize education in order to match the varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the culturally and linguistically diverse students by using multiple alternative assessment methods. A terrific example of an alternative assessment method that I find particularly exciting and motivating is a portfolio project, which can provide a multidimensional way of connecting assessment with instruction based on students' classroom performance.

According to the Center for Applied Linguistics, assessment portfolios differ from norm-referenced or other criterion-referenced testing programs because they provide a broader picture of student achievement than tests alone. The portfolios can include a great deal of information that shows what students know and what they can do on a variety of measures. In contrast, students take a standardized test on a single occasion and then they are compared to other students in their cohort nationwide (Gómez, 1999, pg. 5). Portfolios offer other benefits to the student's learning as well because they demonstrate student learning and achievement more accurately than any single test score can do. The process of preparing and compiling the items needed for a portfolio can improve student learning. In fact, students can acquire self-assessment and self-regulation skills by becoming involved in assessing their own and other's work based on the scoring criteria (Gómez, 1999, pg. 8). Not only do I want to organize a workshop for my colleagues demonstrating the benefits of using portfolio projects for teaching and assessing culturally and linguistically diverse learners, but I think it is valuable for us to share discussion about the economical and political climate of our country today and how it is affecting fair testing practices in education.

This critical discussion needs to include a process of becoming familiar with the policies and practices for the inclusion of limited English proficient students in statewide assessment programs. Just because we are a community college, or a member of the system of higher educational institutions in the State of Massachusetts, and not in the system of public schools for kindergarten through grade twelve, does not mean that we are immune to the negative affects of the No Child Left Behind Act. Yes, it is true that we are not held to the statistics projected by the adequate yearly progress reports that schools need to provide to the government, but we are being held responsible for tracking the persistence rate of the number of learners who will graduate from NSCC. Our school system will also be controlled by the threat of funding being withheld if we do not achieve certain numerical quotas each year.

In order to achieve persistence, teachers in the community college have to become sensitive to the idea of student retention. My definition of student retention includes reaching out to the learners with meaningful discussions in addition to the classroom teaching. Another aspect of my definition of student retention involves making telephone calls to students when you do not see them in the classroom and bringing them back into the environment of learning. Due to my experiences with students and faculty getting involved in service-learning projects with community agencies, I have seen another side to this idea of student retention. Through the example of service-learning projects, similar to the model of portfolio project creations, students do get to have additional opportunities to develop stronger connections with teachers or members of the faculty. In order to complete a service-learning project the teacher and the learner have to develop an opportunity to learn in the real world, an opportunity to reflect on that learning with a journal writing activity, and an opportunity for the learner to share the lesson back in the classroom in the form of a presentation to his or her classmates. The assessment of the project is continuous and a part of the learning because the student makes an assessment of his or her own learning in their reflective journal writing activity. The community agency partner makes an assessment of the student's contributions in the real world and the faculty member makes an assessment of the student's contribution to the classroom environment as a result of his or her service-learning project. Since I teach Spanish as a foreign language in my classrooms my students are encouraged to perform their service-

learning projects in a bilingual community where they will hear the target language spoken by native speakers. At the same time I am teaching my students to become more culturally and linguistically sensitive of another group of people who are struggling to learn a second language as well—just like my students—only in their case they have to learn to speak English in order to survive. It is my sincere hope that I am setting a good example to my students in promoting a healthy attitude change while promoting student retention and having my statistical numbers in persistence climb.

In conclusion, in order to initiate a positive attitude change in teachers an understanding of the historical background of the issues with language proficiency testing and the instruments used to assess English language proficiency is necessary. In addition, the historical attitude towards language and culture in the United States needs to be carefully studied and investigated. Through this investigative process, teachers also need to recognize their own personal responsibility to change their attitudes. Representing our culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families in advocacy positions and networking with other community leaders to become civically engaged can be the key to continued success in leveling the educational playing field for all learners in our national public school system. In order for the teachers to be able to educate the students, their parents, and other community constituents, the teachers have to become well versed and educated in their changing roles in the changing multi-cultural and multi-linguistic world around us.

## References

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