



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

How assessment supports English learners

In 2015, nearly 5 million public school students were identified as English learners, according to the National Center for Education Statistics report, *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018* (de Brey et al., 2019). To serve these students well, educators need professional learning on a range of teaching and learning strategies.

Among the topics where they need support is student assessment. Assessment can provide information about student learning and the effectiveness of classroom strategies, but what are the special considerations when used with English learners?

To better understand the research about how schools and systems



Margo Gottlieb

can support multilingual learners through assessment, we spoke with Margo Gottlieb, an expert in curriculum, instruction, and assessment of language learners and author of more than 90 articles, monographs, handbooks, guides, technical reports, chapters, and assessments. Her latest books include *Assessing Multilingual Learners: A Month-to-Month Guide* (ASCD, 2017), *Language Power: Key Uses for Accessing Content* (with Mariana Castro; Corwin, 2017), and *Assessing English Language Learners: Bridges to*



Educational Equity (Corwin, 2016).

In our conversation, Gottlieb shared a range of insights about the critical nature of assessment as it relates to understanding multilingual learners. (In this column, we use the term “multilingual learner” as she does in her writing to emphasize and focus on the assets of students.) Like other experts highlighted in this issue of *The Learning Professional*, she stresses the importance of recognizing the strengths multilingual students bring to the classroom. As she says, “If you only look through a monolingual lens, you don’t know the whole child.”

ASSESSMENT

Gottlieb has valuable insights about the many uses of assessment and the situations and purposes for which each is most appropriate.

She distinguishes among assessment *as*, *for*, and *of* learning. All three approaches offer entry points into meaningful opportunities for embedded professional learning.

Assessment *as* learning describes an approach where students are at the center, empowered to monitor their own progress in learning. During this process, students interact with each other to develop their own advocacy and agency, facilitated by teachers to define and move toward mutually agreed-upon learning goals.

Gottlieb underscores that, for multilingual learners in particular, educators need to attend to how students can contribute to their own learning in multiple ways by drawing on their own linguistic and cultural experiences, and assessment can be part of this. Integral to assessment as

learning, student and peer assessment provide students opportunities to think about their own learning and progress over time and reflect and discuss learning with their peers.

Assessment *for* learning is associated with formative assessment, the process by which students and teachers plan, gather, and reflect on data related to student learning. “Multilingual learners bring so much to the learning and assessment situation that we as educators need to glean,” she says. Hallmarks of assessment for learning include classroom activities that value multilingual learners’ languages and cultures coupled with concrete, timely, and actionable feedback leading to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Assessment *of* learning is often thought of in relation to traditional large-scale tests that are developed outside the classroom. However, assessment of learning can also be about teachers crafting their own assessments, such as projects at the close of a unit of learning, and designing goals and targets for learning based on conversations among teachers and with students.

This approach promotes agency among teachers because they are collaboratively developing authentic performance assessments that reveal students’ strengths and next steps for learning.

Together, these three approaches can form an assessment system that provides a broad yet balanced view of student learning that, according to Gottlieb, “is both an authentic assessment and an authentic professional learning activity that brings genuine enthusiasm.” With this kind

RESOURCES

Here are resources that support educator learning about assessment and multilingual learners, with comments from Gottlieb.

Basterra, R., Trumbull, E., & Solano-Flores, G. (Eds.) (2011). *Cultural validity in assessment: Addressing linguistic and cultural diversity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2004). Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(1), 8-21.

- Discussion of the importance of teacher-student interaction and of educators knowing students well as an aspect of assessment.

Earl, L.M. (2013). *Assessment as learning: Using classroom assessment to maximize student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

- Focused on assessment as a strategy for daily classroom learning as well as student measurement.

González, N., Moll, L.C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Highlights how sources of cultural knowledge among families and communities can be brought into the work of schools. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWS0YBpGkkE.

Hornberger, N.H. (2002). Multilingual language policies and the continua of biliteracy: An ecological approach. *Language Policy*, 1(1), 27-51.

- An examination of the impact policies that support multilingualism have had in South Africa and Bolivia, with implications about education in the United States.

García, O., Johnson, S.I., & Seltzer, K. (2016). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.

- Language practices to draw on students’ bilingualism to support their engagement with complex academic texts and advance social justice.

Soltero-González, L., Sparrow, W., Butvilofsky, S., Escamilla, K., & Hopewell, S. (2016). Effects of a paired literacy program on emerging bilingual children’s biliteracy outcomes in third grade. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 48(1), 80-104.

- This longitudinal study examines whether the implementation of a Spanish-English paired literacy approach provides an academic advantage to emerging bilingual students over a sequential literacy approach.

of detailed information, district and other leaders can customize professional learning support to help teachers identify and meet outstanding needs of English learners.

LEVERAGING RESEARCH

Professional learning should also incorporate findings from the latest research, as we state in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Together with the three forms of assessment described above, this can paint a vivid picture of what students need and what is most likely to be effective.

For example, if assessment identifies a need to encourage deeper content learning, research illuminates ways teachers can incorporate students' language and cultural experiences into instruction, including students' home languages in peer conversations during class to make complex content accessible.

Gottlieb says that classroom strategies might include creating peer groups of multilingual learners with the same home language, as opposed to separating these students from one another, as has typically been done.

If there is more than one language learner in a classroom, they might be paired so that they feel supported and can process or reflect in the language that allows them to do that most effectively, even if the ensuing large-group class discussion is in English. (See the article by Rosita Apodaca and colleagues on p. 37 for more on these strategies.)

The strategy of incorporating home languages into the classroom can also inform assessment processes. Some students may need to demonstrate their learning in their home language. Even if the questions are given in English, other languages can be used for clarification or to gain a deeper understanding.

Gottlieb says the school and district must create a climate where all multilingual learners and their families are welcome and invited, and where professional learning stresses this expectation.

These shifts call for greater attention to how multilingual students are engaging in dialogue with peers and with teachers, Gottlieb points out. But research shows that with such consideration, "student talk increasingly permeates the classroom," she says.

CREATING A CULTURE OF SUPPORT

Fostering educators' learning about teaching multilingual learners requires a culture of support at the school and district levels. Gottlieb says the school and district must create a climate where all multilingual learners and their families are welcome and invited, and where professional learning stresses this expectation.

This starts with classrooms that honor and leverage the multicultural and multilingual knowledge brought by all students. "Students need to see their languages and cultures all around the school every day," Gottlieb says. Teachers and school leaders can support these learners by displaying reading materials that depict multiple languages and cultures and hanging student drawings and posters that represent the schools' cultures and languages.

To make sure such strategies are realized, professional learning can include them as topics for discussion and exploration through shared reading, collaborative conversations, and peer-to-peer observation and coaching.

A deep understanding of how to integrate strategies that support multilingual learners is especially important in assessment-related professional learning so that assessment can be used as a teaching tool that comes from the ground up when teams of teachers come together to assess progress toward standards and what works for which students in which contexts.

Districts have a role in furthering this culture of support being developed in classrooms and schools. Gottlieb suggests that district leaders elevate the status of classroom-level assessments to provide a more inclusive and reflective picture of multilingual learners.

Classroom assessments developed by teachers can provide evidence of student learning via portfolios and performance assessments and turn student learning artifacts into data that can be part of a comprehensive assessment picture along with federal, district, and state accountability requirements. This process places real value on the data that are generated at the classroom level.

Gottlieb says that this comprehensive support is not only good for multilingual learners, but also for all students and educators. "We live in a multicultural world, and we shouldn't deny that. By having students represent multiple languages and cultures, you are gaining a more global view of learning, rather than restricting it to one data source. By tapping all these data sources, you are getting a richer, more comprehensive view of whatever issue is at hand."

LOOKING FORWARD

What new or additional research would add to the field and to educators' understanding of these important issues? Gottlieb suggests more studies about the impact of dual language learning on multilingual students.

It is important to try to understand how language is a mediator that impacts students' access to academic achievement and therefore their mastery of the content.

In addition, since traditional accountability rests on tests in English, it is an ongoing challenge to discern how language might mask the results. Further, she suggests we need to know more about the ways multilingualism can be an asset to learning and classroom cultures and how educator misconceptions of multilingual learners might challenge student learning.

The charge to understand and appreciate multilingual learners and incorporate their assets into classroom and instructional practices carries implications for professional learning at the individual, collaborative, and system levels. The Standards for Professional

LET US HEAR FROM YOU

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Learning that are particularly relevant to this issue are the **Data standard**, which underscores the importance of a deliberate and sustained focus on examining data generated from the range of possible assessments, and the **Outcomes standard**, which encourages us to consider the skills and knowledge we need to address every student's learning experience and students' equitable access to academic content.

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