

IDEAS for Excellence

Featured Inside—'Teaching Tip' – By Educators, For Educators

**BALLARD
& TIGHE**
PUBLISHERS

FALL 2001

The Enigma of Standardized Tests: Assessing Young Children's Literacy Development

by Margo Gottlieb, Ph.D.

The recent wave of school reform across the United States has ushered in a renewed emphasis on student testing. Educators, whether proponents or foes of the testing movement, have integrated standardized tests into school life. Given the growing presence of externally imposed measures by school districts and states, how can teachers use test data to enhance teaching and learning?

The controversy over standardized testing is complicated by the ongoing debate about the nature of the beginning stages that mark early literacy. The educational community agrees that literacy is the hallmark of academic success. Teachers, as informed decision-makers, must be aware of current research and its implications for instruction and assessment. The question becomes, how can the key components of reading and writing development be measured?

In addition to the burning issues of standardized testing and literacy, we add another element to the fire: young children. Closely associated with young children's cognitive development are dramatic changes in their language and communication in the early school years. Increasingly, teachers are challenged to

promote language and literacy development in children with diverse language and cultural experiences. This prompts yet another question: when is it appropriate to assess language acquisition, in general, and concepts about literacy, in particular?

Clearly there is enormous complexity surrounding the use of standardized tests to assess literacy in young children. This article explores this issue and addresses—albeit tentatively—answers to the perplexing questions. As a starting point, it is important to distinguish between the types of standardized tests and describe their identifying features and then to outline the benefits and challenges of using standardized literacy measures with young children. Finally, attention will turn to the development of a new type of standardized literacy test for our growing population of young English language learners (ELLs).

Types of Standardized Measures

Generally two types of standardized measures are widely administered in schools with ELLs: language proficiency tests and academic achievement tests.

Language proficiency tests measure a student's overall performance in listening, speaking, reading, and/or writing. Results of language proficiency tests indicate the extent to which the student has acquired a first or second language, inside and out of school.

Academic achievement tests measure a student's mastery of curricular material, directly tied to schooling. Results of academic achievement tests express a student's performance in relation to specific instructional content.

As evident from the chart on the following page, language proficiency and academic achievement tests have a unique set of characteristics and are intended for use in different contexts. The primary purpose of language proficiency tests is to determine whether ELLs require support services (e.g., English as a second language, bilingual education, or Title I) or should participate in state assessment or other achievement tests. The content of language proficiency tests reflects language acquisition theory and research and depicts a continuum representative of the language development process.



The performance of ELLs on language proficiency tests is indexed in relation to that of their native English speaking peers. This is based on the premise that native speakers have gained full fluency and have successfully progressed through the continuum. Information from proficiency tests is useful in making decisions about ELL placement with regard to the extent and type of support service the student needs. Stakes are generally low because grade-level placement of students is not affected by the results. As such, schools should not be negatively impacted due to an influx of new ELLs.

FEATURES OF STANDARDIZED LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT TESTS		
	Language Proficiency Tests	Academic Achievement Tests
Primary Purpose	Screening, classification, and reclassification	Accountability and program evaluation
Content	Theoretically-based, tied to language acquisition	Curriculum-based, tied to subject matter content
Criteria for Measurement	Performance of native English speaking peers in relation to the language acquisition process	Performance of students in relation to ESL/language arts or subject matter standards
Norming Sample	Heterogeneous mix of ELLs with some representation of native English speakers	Heterogeneous mix of native English speakers with some representation of language minority students
Use of Data	Initial placement and reclassification; monitor student progress	Standards attainment; ranking of students; promotion/retention
Stakes	Low	High

- There is significant variability (all within an acceptable range) in language proficiency, including the emergence of literacy, among young children.
- There is significant variability (all within an acceptable range) of cognitive and emotional development among young children.
- Language proficiency is a global construct—it offers a generalized notion of young ELLs’ response to literacy-related topics.
- The influence of first language is more readily detected in language proficiency

measures. This is due in part to the design and construction of the test and, in part, to the inclusion of substantial numbers of ELLs in the norming population.

Given these considerations, language proficiency testing is more sensitive to capturing young ELLs’ overall reading and writing performance than tests of academic achievement. By defining the developmental progression of acquiring literacy, the results of language proficiency tests inform teachers of students’ total exposure to reading and writing experiences. Instruction then can be more readily designed to meet individual student needs.

Debating Standardized Testing

Although arguments run deep in early childhood circles against achievement testing in the early grades (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Kamii, 1990), testing remains pervasive in elementary schools and is regarded by many as an acceptable form of data collection and analysis for young children. This section looks at the way standardized testing is construed by the educational community as a whole and examines the issue as an educational asset or a hindrance.

Academic achievement tests, on the other hand, are linked to student, teacher, and/or school accountability with the subject matter content in accordance with state or district content standards. For the most part, these standardized measures are designed for and normed on native English speaking students. Information from achievement tests indicates the extent to which students have met content standards as well as the ranking of students in relation to the norming group. High-stake decisions, such as promotion or retention of students and funding for schools, are often based on results from achievement testing.

Which type of standardized test—language proficiency or academic achievement—is most appropriate for young ELLs who are acquiring literacy as well as oral language? There is no straightforward answer to this question. However, until ELLs have reached a threshold of language proficiency in English and are able to demonstrate a level of language performance that is competitive with their English speaking peers, standardized testing for academic achievement in English is neither equitable nor valid. By default, then, proficiency data provide a more accurate estimate of initial literacy for this population. Justification for this choice is based on several factors:

Key Terms

Academic achievement: the demonstration of students’ mastery of curricular material. Academic achievement is often tied to content standards.

Academic literacy: reading and writing competencies students exhibit related to formal schooling experiences; these aspects of language are strongly associated with achievement.

Developmental continuum: an accepted progression of language acquisition milestones, that is based on research.

Functional literacy: reading and writing competencies students exhibit in nonacademic and academic situations.

Language proficiency: the linguistic knowledge and competencies students exhibit in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Performance measure: activities or tasks that require students to construct a response, create a product, or demonstrate application of knowledge; such activities or tasks are interpreted with specified criteria.

When standardized testing is considered as one of many data sources in making educational decisions and is complemented with classroom-based documentation, a comprehensive profile of a student emerges. Information from standardized tools is unique and can be validated, but not duplicated, with other kinds of evidence. The listing to the right enumerates some of the benefits of using standardized tests of language proficiency and academic achievement, if certain provisions are met.

There is also a downside to standardized testing. This is especially true for young children who are inexperienced test-takers and who may not have the maturity to sustain dedicated involvement in such a structured and demanding task. Some of the arguments that are levied on the con side of this debate are shown below. Standardized tests generally do not:

- reflect developmentally appropriate practices of early childhood classrooms
- engage students in problem-solving and higher-level thinking
- make provision for students' creativity of expression
- represent authentic or real situations
- connect to children's lives and experiences
- tap multicultural perspectives

So, how is this debate resolved? One critical factor that has been missing from this discussion is the teacher's role in students' literacy development. Teachers observe and interact with students on a daily basis and their judgment, based on substantiated evidence, ought to be part of a total assessment package. In other words, as long as classroom data are defensible and have been systematically gathered and interpreted, the teacher's contribution must be valued as well.

A variety of classroom methods and tools are effective in measuring reading and writing progress in young children. Many are performance-based assessments in which the student is directly and actively involved. For example, the student might be asked to retell a story that has been read or produce a writing sample. The data

BENEFITS OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

Standardized tests:

- offer a perspective
- provide one source for accountability
- are reliable
- generate summative data at regular intervals
- produce trend data over time

provided:

- there is an ample and representative sample of students and states/regions
- they are administered under standard conditions and are aligned with designation standards
- there are sufficient numbers of items and a large sample size; scorers are trained to reach strong inter-rater agreement
- the timetable for administration remains the same from year to year
- the same tests are administered year after year

from these kinds of assessments are interpreted using a scoring guide or rubric. In fact, standardized language proficiency tests often have rubrics that may be applied to everyday instructional activities. A literacy portfolio that contains information obtained from performance-based and standardized measures provides students, teachers, and parents with an understanding of a student's ongoing development in the areas of reading and writing.

Defending a New Type of Standardized Literacy Measure for ELLs

Rigorous content standards firmly entrenched in schools, school districts, and states serve as anchors for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. With the emphasis on aligning standards with these critical components of schooling, we need to reconceptualize standardized testing for ELLs. We can no longer rely solely on language proficiency testing that is not grounded in state goals for literacy. Neither can we depend on tests of academic achievement that do not reflect the ways in which young ELLs acquire reading and writing skills or the reading and writing they have been exposed to.

Measurement of literacy in English for ELLs needs to encompass both the constructs of language proficiency and academic achievement. A blended standardized test would have a constellation of features from both types of standardized tests and would

consist of two tiers. Tier 1 would serve as a proficiency-based screening tool that would place students on a developmental continuum of reading and writing. Tier 2 would center on the measurement of national literacy standards derived from English as a Second Language (TESOL, 1997) in combination with Language Arts (NCTE, 1997) that would indicate the extent of attainment of content standards.

What would this new kind of standardized literacy test for young children look like? The instrument would work on two levels. At one level, referred to as Tier 1—Language Proficiency, literacy concepts would be drawn from the world of young children and represent the linguistic and cultural diversity that surrounds us. The emphasis at this level is on functional literacy, that is, how we use symbols and print to communicate. At the second level, referred to as Tier 2—Academic Achievement, literacy concepts would be derived from content standards and would represent school curriculum in early childhood years. The emphasis at this level is on academic literacy, that is, how we use the rules of literacy to understand and relate subject matter knowledge.

Results from Tier 1 would identify a student's position on the developmental scale of reading and writing for a particular age cluster. Strategic points on the continuum would correspond to levels of proficiency that, in turn, would determine whether a student would participate in Tier 2. Results from Tier 2

would identify the extent to which the student has attained literacy standards for a particular grade-level cluster. Defined performance levels could assist in determining whether the student would be eligible to take a district, state, or national test.

In closing, standardized testing should be part of the repertoire of tools educators have available to document student progress. When tests are crafted for a specific audience with a specified purpose and the results provide valid information teachers understand, value, and use, then teachers will have greater confidence in how they teach and how children learn. The approach outlined above, which argues for a new type of standardized literacy test that combines language proficiency and academic achievement, could provide educators with a more comprehensive understanding of reading and writing development for ELLs. It also could help educators make better educational decisions for young students. ■

Margo Gottlieb, Ph. D., director of assessment and evaluation for the Illinois Resource Center, develops and implements sound assessment instruments and systems for English language learners. She has presented nationally and internationally, and has published many professional articles and research reports.

Speaking Out...

How do you create a comprehensive language development profile of your young students?

Dr. Cecilia Minden-Cupp

University of Virginia

In my school, we evaluate our students in four primary areas: vocabulary, reading, writing, and comprehension. We use both standardized testing (vocabulary lists and reading passages based on the curriculum) and informal assessment (interviews, writing samples, and teacher observations). This combination of both standardized and informal assessment enables us to obtain a more accurate literacy development profile.

their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. I think it's important to make language learning relevant and fun for my students so I incorporate activities that involve their interests. I include products from their work in their portfolios.

Lotus Hoey

*Pre-K/ESL Teacher
Mayde Creek
Elementary
Katy ISD, TX*



I begin the year by using informal assessments, visuals, TPR, lots of music, and child-centered activities to gain insight into my students' verbal skills. I use that information to create a set of anecdotal notes about each student. I also collect samples of activities for the students' portfolios. I share these with the class and with parents during conferences. The formal assessment comes from the Pre-IPT and IPT tests. I use the data collected from all these assessments to build a complete profile of my students. ■

Lauren L. Nguyen

*Reading Teacher/Trainer
Houston ISD, TX*

I like to use a combination of portfolios, teacher observation, and formal assessment. The portfolios can contain written and/or recorded (audio/video) samples of student work showcasing the development of



REFERENCES

Bredenkamp, S. and T. Rosegrant (Eds.). (1992). *Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment of Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 students. (1997). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Kamii, C. (Ed.). (1990). *Achievement Testing in the Early Grades: The Games Grown-ups Play*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts. (1997). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

The IPT[®] Early Literacy Test

Are your K-1 students developing the literacy skills necessary to succeed in the classroom?

The new IPT Early Literacy Test is a nationally normed instrument to assess the skills that students need to become successful readers and writers. It is appropriate for:

- Mainstream students
- LEP students
- Special-needs students

Contact Ballard & Tighe to learn more about the IPT Early Literacy Test.
(800) 321-4332 • www.ballard-tighe.com • info@ballard-tighe.com



Now Available

Congratulations

Hats off to **Emma Galindo Armendariz** of Longfellow Elementary School in Albuquerque, NM for receiving the Bilingual Administrator of the Year Award.

Best wishes to **David Briseño** of Clovis, NM, who is the new president of NMABE.

Congratulations to **Hilda Carr-Gaona** on her new position as principal of Evans Elementary School in Tempe, AZ.

We celebrate with **Peggy Jean Conners** of Cerro Villa Middle School in Villa Park, CA, who was recently named one of the Teachers of the Year for the Orange Unified School District.

Jesus Escarcega of Lakewood, CO was recently named program manager for the Jefferson County School District. Way to go!

Congratulations to **Mary Ellen Gallegos** on her new position as education program specialist for the U.S. Department of Education.

Hats off to **Dr. Jessie Gonzalez** for being named the new superintendent of Compton USD in Compton, CA.

Kudos to **Olga Gonzalez** of Rio Grande City, TX on being named TABE Teacher of the Year.

Hats off to **Marcy Granillo** of Isaac Elementary School District #15 in Phoenix, AZ on her new position as Title VII Director.

We applaud **Mary Jean Habermann-López** of Placitas, NM on receiving the Matias I. Chacón Award.

Dr. Gladys Herrera-Gurule of Santa Fe, NM was appointed as the new bilingual director for the State Bilingual Department. Way to go!

We celebrate with **Luz Marie Linney** of Houston, TX on being named Houston ISD Teacher of the Year.

Hats off to **Pat Mann** of Nohl Canyon Elementary in Anaheim, CA on recently being named one of the Teachers of the Year for the Orange Unified School District.

Congratulations to **Diane Patterson**, who is the new principal of East Picacho Elementary School in Las Cruces, NM.

We salute **Gloria Rendon** of Santa Fe, NM, who is the new superintendent of the Santa Fe Public Schools.

We applaud **Vicki Ritter** of Canyon High School in Anaheim, CA on recently being named one of the Teachers of the Year for the Orange Unified School District.

Sandra Starr of Bellaire High School in Houston, TX was named ESL Teacher of the Year. Well done!

Kudos to **Irma Valdespino** of Mayfield High School in Las Cruces, NM for receiving the National Educational Association Assistant of the Year Award. ■

Don't Be Left Out! Join the *IDEAS for Excellence* Listserv.

IDEAS for Excellence is a free publication, designed especially for English language educators. This is a great way to stay current, and now it can come to you automatically via e-mail.

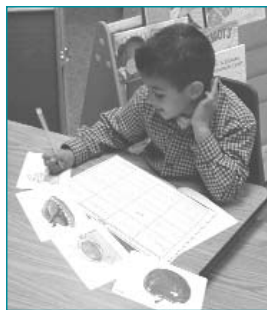
To begin receiving *IDEAS for Excellence* by e-mail, please contact us at info@ballard-tighe.com. On the subject line, write *IDEAS for Excellence* listserv, and in the message portion please write your name, school, state, and e-mail address.



Teaching Tip

During my years as an ESL instructor, the IDEA materials served as the launching pad for a great deal of my instruction. I would introduce the vocabulary using the picture cards from *IDEA Pictures & Words*.

Next I would write the words on a large piece of oak tag. In order to have the students associate the spoken word with the written word, I



would flash the picture cards and then have the students locate the word on the oak tag. Following this, I would reproduce the bingo page found in the *Carousel of IDEAS* activity book and have the students select different words from the oak tag to fill in their bingo sheet. I would flash the picture cards and have the children compete to see who got bingo first. Even new arrivals became very animated when we played bingo.

Elaine Kapusta
Former ESL Instructor
Freehold Township, NJ

Do you have an innovative idea to share with other educators? Please submit your 'Teaching Tip' to the *IDEAS for Excellence* editor, Jill Kinkade. You can contact her at (800) 321-4332 or jkinkade@ballard-tighe.com. Remember, you will receive free teaching materials if we use your submission!!

Ballard & Tighe is exhibiting at the following conferences.

Come visit us and see our new materials on display!

Carolina TESOL September 21-22 Charleston, SC	TABE October 17-20 Dallas, TX	National Association for the Education of Young Children October 31-November 3 Anaheim, CA	California Reading Association November 8-10 Ontario, CA	Midwest Association of Language Testers January 21-22 Oak Brook, IL	Iowa ESL February 20-21 Des Moines, IA
Texas Council for the Social Studies October 5-7 Galveston, TX	CO ABE October 19-20 Breckenridge, CO	National Middle Schools Association November 1-3 Washington, D.C.	National Council for the Social Studies November 17-19 Washington, D.C.	National Title I Conference January 23-26 Tampa, FL	NM Bilingual February 21-23 Albuquerque, NM
MATSOL October 12-13 Sturbridge, MA	New Mexico Council for the Social Studies October 26-27 Albuquerque, NM	TexTESOL November 3-4 Austin, TX	ESL 2001 December 7-8 Louisville, KY	CABE 2002 January 30-February 2 San Jose, CA	TESOL 2002 February 28-March 3 Salt Lake City, UT

Ballard & Tighe, Publishers
P.O. Box 219
Brea, CA 92822-0219

PRSR STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 2167
LAS VEGAS, NV



**BALLARD
& TIGHE**
PUBLISHERS

P.O. Box 219
Brea, CA 92822-0219
Phone: (800) 321-4332
FAX: (714) 255-9828

We're online! Please visit our web site at
www.ballard-tighe.com

IDEAS for Excellence
published semiannually by

Ballard & Tighe, Publishers
P.O. Box 219 • Brea, CA 92822-0219
(800) 321-4332

www.ballard-tighe.com

e-mail: info@ballard-tighe.com

President/Owner • Dorothy L. Roberts

Director of Marketing & Product Development • David Brisco

Managing Editor • Laurie Regan

Editor • Jill Kinkade

Editorial Staff • Kristin Belsher, Patrice Gotsch,

Allison Mangrum, Roberta Stathis, Ph.D.

Marketing Staff • Larry Newton

Desktop Publishing Staff • Kathleen Styffe, George Hsieh

Printing Coordinator • Cathy Sanchez

Submissions for research articles, features, and commentary are welcome; material may be edited for length, style, and appropriateness.

All submissions must include the author's name, address, and telephone number.

©2001 IDEAS for Excellence. All rights reserved. Reproductions in any form, in part or in whole, are prohibited without written permission from the publisher.