Building the Bridge Between Schools and Families through Assessment of Young English Language Learners

DAVID PRATT
Purdue University Northwest

ABSTRACT

Teachers of English Language Learners (ELLs) have a unique opportunity to connect with families through observation, documentation, and assessment of children. Assessments using developmentally appropriate and asset-based approaches can be collected and shared with families to engage them in the learning process. This article provides practical steps for using a variety of formative assessment methods by which teachers of ELL's can build this vital bridge to families successfully.

Keywords: assessment, observation, documentation, ELLs, families, teaching

Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) in K-12 classrooms have expanded to record levels in the US, providing new challenges and opportunities for classroom teachers. According to the US Department of Education NCES report, ELLs now comprise 14% of all public-school students (NCES, 2016). The result of this growing population is that more and more teachers have English Language Learners in their classrooms. Teachers of ELLs, however, may not understand how to engage these students and their families. When done well, observing, documenting, and assessing English Language Learners can build a greater connection between families, teachers and ELLs.

A New Perspective of "Assessment"

Before reviewing strategies for bridging teachers and families through assessment, it is important to define assessment from a new perspective. For some students, families and teachers,

the term “assessment” is often associated with a negative connotation and high-stakes tests. The original word, however, has a much different meaning. The word assessment comes from the Latin word “assidere,” which means to “sit beside” (Stefanakis, 2002). Assessment, therefore, should be considered as something personal and individualized. When done well, integrating observation, documentation and assessment with families can lead to positive outcomes for teaching and learning and promote building relationships between students, teachers, and families.

Imagine a scenario in which a teacher often calls on Lily, a first grader, to read out loud in class and participate weekly in spelling tests. Then the teacher calls home to report to the mother that Lily is not participating in class reading and is cheating on the tests. It turns out that Lily (Liliana) was recently adopted from Ukraine and has limited English proficiency. The teacher, though already informed of the situation, was not “sitting beside” and aware of Lily’s language needs. To appropriately meet the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of students, teachers must remove the negative stigma of testing and adopt a more personal “sitting beside” approach to understand the needs of all children.

Parents or caregivers are in fact the child’s first teachers and already have strong interest in their children. When teachers assess students, they can rely on family input to help strengthen that relationship and improve assessment. Most families of ELLs have a strong belief and support of schooling and want their children to succeed in school (Good et al., 2010). In the scenario described earlier, Lily’s mom was incredibly knowledgeable and interested in her daughter’s education and future. The teacher, however, missed an opportunity by not relying on the expertise of Lily’s mother to better understand her strengths and needs. When teachers choose to work with families, this provides a unique opportunity to be engaged directly with the

best source of knowledge about what the child can and cannot do yet and how to best help them. In addition, it provides an opportunity to share with families how they can reinforce the appropriate skills they are working on at school.

Related to the understanding of “sitting beside”, formative assessment may be the most effective educational practice to support student academic achievement (Black et al.,1998). Formative assessment focuses on progress monitoring and growth versus a comparison to others, which is typical when conducting high-stakes assessment. Sharing information with families about the progress of students allows them to be more engaged with their child’s learning. This bridge between home and school can be beneficial to the child’s overall growth and development.

Assessment, particularly formative assessment, can be done as a part of regular school activities during any part of the day. It requires observing and documenting how each child behaves, learns, reacts, and interacts. Reflecting on information and using the data to guide decisions is an ongoing process that all interested parties (families and teachers) can practice. Involving all parties in observing, documenting, and assessing children is a vital part in helping guide the development of ELLs.

Teachers may be prepared to assess non-ELLs but may struggle with how to appropriately engage ELLs and their families in this process (Dollaghan et al., 2011). To address this, teachers can build the bridge with families of ELLs by (1) overcoming their own biases to create a point of entry; (2) using developmentally appropriate practices; and (3) communicating with families about assessment.

Overcoming Bias

When assessing ELLs, is important to address any biases and use objective assessment practices. Educational bias takes place in different gender, cultural, economic, and ethnic situations. Research has demonstrated that bias is also more common among teachers when they are working with students from different cultural backgrounds (Souto-Manning et al., 2016).

Bias can be exhibited in practices, attitudes, and behavioral expectations. These biases occur when teachers give an advantage to one culture or preferring one culture over another. Addressing one's own biases when assessing ELLs is the first step in building a bridge to engage families. A great resource for helping with addressing biases can be found at: http://www.tolerance.org. This teaching tolerance website provides free resources to teachers which emphasize social justice and anti-bias approaches. These resources include teaching materials and professional development opportunities (podcasts, journals, etc.) that can help address implicit biases.

Teacher bias, even if they are implicit, often negatively impacts the assessment process. When observing ELL's behaviors, it is particularly common for subjective language to be used, possibly inferring what a child is thinking. For example, children from some cultures learn that it is inappropriate to initiate conversations with adults, to engage with other children competitively, or to look, directly at adults. To practice being more objective in recording observations, an interactive guide is available at: http://toddlers.ccdmd.qc.ca/netquiz/Objective-Writing/ This website provides a free quiz to help identify when observations are written subjectively and provide training for how to revise those notes. Users first watch short video clips of young children and sort each observation statement as either objective or subjective. After submitting answers, the user is provided with a score and additional hints to learn from incorrect responses. The second part of the training includes a challenge of highlighting ONE sentence out of 3-5 that

is subjective (shows bias). Finally, users are asked to modify a subjective observation statement and convert it into one that is objective.

Using an Asset-Based Approach to Assessment

Another way to overcome bias and begin bridging relationships with families is to use an "assets-based" approach of assessment. Unfortunately, a "deficit" way of thinking has been in place for a long-time regarding ELLs and what they can offer (Valencia, 1993). A deficit model is one that sees differences to the norm as a problem that needs to be fixed, whereas an asset-based approach recognizes the benefits and opportunities to the diversity (Rose, 2006). NAEYC, an organization supporting the education and development of young children, can provide a guide for an asset-based thinking about ELLs and their families. NAEYC has developed several recommendations for connecting families to classrooms and describes linguistic and cultural diversity as being an "asset, not deficit, for young children" (NAEYC 2009, p 1). This organization has recommended that teachers (1) Actively involve families in the early learning program, (2) Help all families realize the cognitive advantages of a child knowing more than one language, and provide them with strategies to support, maintain, and preserve home language learning, and (3) Convince families that their home's cultural values and norms are honored. WIDA (2014) also describes an asset-based approach as "The belief that all children bring to their learning cultural and linguistic practices, skills, and ways of knowing from their homes and communities" (p. 5). It is the focus on what students CAN DO, not what they CANNOT DO that must remain the central point of assessment.

To practice an asset-based approach, teachers can go through an exercise to learn how to appreciate the strengths rather than just the problems of students they are assessing. Teachers think of a student they work with that receives the most negative attention. These are students

who may have challenges academically or behaviorally. Then, they can focus on that same student's strengths. Leveraging one's natural talents or "strengths" provides the greatest opportunity for development, rather than focusing on weaknesses, according to recent evidence related to positive psychology (Jimerson et al., 2002). This focus on assets, rather than deficits, then becomes a natural point of entry to engaging families in the discussion about assessment.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Assessing ELLs

Observing, documenting, and assessing children requires knowing how to keep records (document), and analyze information gathered to provide an effective learning environment for improved student learning. It is best to observe children in natural settings (i.e. classroom, playground), which include their normal everyday activities, both individually and in small and whole groups. This can be overwhelming at first, as it involves listening not only to the child's words but paying attention to emotional tone, body language, how children use materials and interact with others. While many teachers may informally observe and take mental notes of behaviors that are useful for assessment, they may fall short of completing the cycle of assessment which includes documentation, reflection, and making adjustments to instruction to improve student learning or engagement. High quality observations provide a systemic, personalized framework for data collection that can help teachers better assess student's assets and needs. It includes a reflective process that asks questions like "What have I learned about how my students learn?" and "How did they respond to the activities I provided?" Goodman (1985) coined the term "kidwatcher" as a teacher who observes students' activities to explore how they learn and think. This "kid watching" can be used to determine the next steps of instruction and what interventions might be implemented to support ELLs.

Another key to observing children is to know WHAT to focus on. Understanding what to assess relies on knowing research on child development and what is developmentally appropriate practices for each student. Research has provided many guidelines and developmental milestones which should be studied when assessing children. It is important that consideration is given to the variety of domains that should be assessed including physical, cognitive, language and social/emotional. More information can be found at: https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html This website was developed by the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) to share developmental milestones and provides videos and pictures in a variety of domains.

Procedures for Assessing ELLs

Once an objective and assets-based perspective and developmentally appropriate practices are adopted, focus can be given to HOW this assessment will take place procedurally. There are various types of observation methodologies and formats for collecting information that can be used. Running records and anecdotal records are two of the most common types of recording techniques used (Cartwright et al., 1982). Running records refer to in-the-moment observations. It is essentially a "play-by-play" of what is going on. This approach is helpful as it allows for real-time documentation of events but is limited-in that it requires a dedicated observer, which is not always possible. Anecdotal notes are also common and refer to notes from events that were important to record but must be recorded after the fact.

For anecdotal records to be successful, teachers must plan out what behaviors or learning outcomes they are wanting to observe. Anecdotal notes of significant events related to those outcomes can be jotted down throughout or after the day of observation. The content of anecdotal notes often includes date and name of student being observed, strengths or positive

traits, and teachers comments for plan of action or what to look for in future observations. It is helpful when teachers follow an ABC approach for recording which contains the Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence of the event.

Collecting information about students' growth can rely on a variety of formats. It is important to consider a friendly and useful format that can be completed efficiently. One example of this easy process is using sticky notes to record running records of activity. Teachers can carry a stack of sticky notes and jot down behaviors and then combine those with others written in the past to track progress over time.

Portfolios are used as well as folders, communication journals and daily reports to record and share information about children (O'Malley et al., 1996). Davies (2002) provides several guidelines for what to include and the approach to take when using portfolios. Most important are that students are involved in the process of selecting and reflecting on their own sample of work. It is imperative that ELLs also participate in communicating their own strengths and areas to improve when reviewing materials in which they have created and received feedback. The materials included demonstrate progress, growth, and development (Babee et al., 2013). This reflection time can be an important part of the learning process specifically for ELL populations (Shao-Ting et al., 2010).

Technology-oriented applications have entered the market such as SeeSaw (http://www.seesaw.com) and ClassDojo (http://www.classdojo.com). These technologies allow teachers to record student work and have available in a portfolio format which can be shared with families. Many of these apps/web-based programs rely on using digital cameras to record either video or direct evidence of children's work or behaviors that require documentation.

Rubrics or checklists are also quite common ways to document learners and are specifically helpful to track progress in certain behaviors.

Formative assessment methods for collecting data rather than standardized tests are better indicators of what ELLs can do. Younger students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly have not been socialized to these types of tests, and one may end up underestimating the child's actual abilities (Navarrete et al., 1990). Relying on developmentally appropriate observations and using a variety of assessment formats can provide the best results of what a child can do and how to best help them reach their full potential.

Communicating Assessment with Families

When communicating assessment results with families it is important to remember the purpose for involving families in the first place. Why is the connection between families and school so important? Several research studies have supported family involvement by showing a positive effect on student achievement, and conversely, that lack of family participation in the learning process can be detrimental to students (Wilder, 2014). In a study of preschool students' grades and skill ratings, for example, Marcon (1999) found that parents with high involvement ratings had higher achieving students. This finding held across income levels and backgrounds of a variety of families. In research specific to migrant parents, another study found that children who were successful in school had family members who were actively engaged in supporting their children's education. López (2001) adds, however, that this engagement among ELL families might be in ways that are not commonly recognized by educators and policymakers. A variety of conceptualizations of involvement must be provided in these cases. Finally, Choi (2015) discovered that a high level of family engagement with school can impact achievement and self-efficacy well into high school.

Teachers must value parents as an important source of assessment information. Many opportunities for formal and informal exchanges with families to gather and share information about the child are important. Formal conferences are one way this can be accomplished, but informal communication should start on the first encounter with the child and families. Early in the process, information can be collected about the child's interests and background. Using an Interest Inventory in the family's native language is one way to accomplish this. An Interest Inventory is simply a list of questions that is designed to get to know the student better and build better relationships. One study reported children completing interest inventories appreciated the opportunity to talk about their interests, skills, and experiences (Brenna et al., 2017). Another study reported positive results in using this survey information for assessing early reading motivation (Marinak et al., 2015).

Collecting information about students' language development could be of particular importance for ELLs and their families. ELLs are unique in their backgrounds and may have a variety of languages that are used in the home that are important to consider. The student language inventory can include questions such as: Is English your first language? Can you speak another language? If yes, what language? What language do you speak most often with your family? As the first step in a multi-step method of recognizing students who qualify for English learner student services, most state education departments across the United States recommend or mandate schools to use a home language survey (Zehr, 2010). The Department of Education has developed a home language survey assess and support students' English language acquisition and achievement (Henry et al., 2017).

When sharing information such as portfolios of the child's work, allow opportunities for parents to ask questions and share their own experiences. When interviewing parents of ELLs

about their experience in schools, it was found that barriers were more deeply rooted in relationships than in language differences (Good et al., 2010). The teacher can gain considerable insight into the child by listening carefully to parent responses and reports on their experiences with the child. Important information about the child's use of language can be gained from parent conferences, especially when the language used in the child's classroom is different from the language used at home.

When working with families, it is important to encourage home language and literacy development. Teachers need to assure families that the continuation of the home language contributes to children's ability to acquire English Language proficiency. Honoring and appreciating the cognitive advantage of multiple languages is key and can support and preserve home language learning. When communicating with families, it is important whenever possible to use home language.

Conclusion

ELLs are a growing population of children who will be filling tomorrow's classrooms; therefore, it is vital for teachers to have a solid foundation for engaging students and their families in the assessment process to ensure optional learning. The teacher to family connection reaps many benefits including a window into the abilities and provides an asset-based approach to assessment. Assessing ELLs is different than assessing native English-speaking students, and engaging families is an important component of that process. The bridges teachers build with families today will have a more positive impact on ELLs growth and development for the future. By building these bridges with families through assessment, we can all "sit beside" and share in the child's growth and development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. David Pratt, Ph.D. is a professor of Education at the School of Education and Counseling at Purdue University Northwest specializing in the areas of assessment and technology. Dr. Pratt was an elementary and middle school teacher in California for 10 years. He and his wife Debra Pratt, regularly present on the topic of assessment and English Language Learners at regional and national conferences and provide professional development for schools and early childcare programs in Northwest Indiana.

Inquiries can be sent to Dr. David Pratt at dmpratt@pnw.edu

References

Babaee, M., & Mereseini, T. (2013). E-portfolios: a new trend in formative writing assessment. *International Journal of Modern Education Forum,* 2(2), 49-56.

Black, P. & D. Wiliam (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, *5* (1), 1-12. doi: 10.1080/0969595980050102

Brenna, B., Myburgh, J., Aubichon, S., Baker, A. Fee, R. (2017). Exploring the use of interest inventories with elementary students: A rich foundation for literacy curriculum making. *The Reading Professor,* 39(1).

Cartwright, C.A. & Ward, C.B. (1982). Observation techniques. *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society*, 14(4), 19-29. doi: 10.1300/J274v14n04_04

Choi, N., Chang, M., Kim, S., & Reio, T. G. (2015). A structural model of parent involvement with demographic and academic variables. *Psychology in the Schools, 52*, 154-167. doi:10.1002/pits.21813

Chrispeels, J. H., & Rivero, E. (2000). Engaging Latino families for student success: Understanding the process and impact of providing training to parents. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Davies, A. (2000). *Making Classroom Assessment Work*. Merville, BC: Connections Publishing

Dollaghan, C. A., Horner, E. A. (2011). Bilingual language assessment: A meta-analysis of diagnostic accuracy. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 54, 1077-1088. doi:10.1044/1092-4388

Good, M., Masewicz, S., & Vogel, L. (2010). Latino English language learners: Bridging achievement and cultural gaps between schools and families. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 9(4), 321-339. doi: 10.1080/15348431.2010.491048

Goodman, Y. M. (1985). Kidwatching: Observing children in the classroom. In A. Jagger and M. T. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the Language Learner (pp. 9-18).* Urbana: NCTE and IRA.

Henry, S. F., Mello, D., Avery, M. P., Parker, C., & Stafford, E. (2017). Home language survey data quality self -assessment (REL 2017–198). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

Jimerson, S.R., Sharkey, J.D., Nyborg, V. (2004). Strength-based assessment and school psychology: A summary and synthesis. *Contemporary School Psychology* 9, 9–19. doi: 10.1007/BF03340903

López, G. R. (2001). On whose terms? Understanding involvement through the eyes of migrant parents. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.

Marinak, B.A., Malloy, J.B., Gambrell, L.B., & Mazzoni, S.A. (2015). Me and my reading profile: A tool for assessing early reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher*, 69(1), 51-62. doi: 10.1002/trtr.1362

Marcon, R. A. (1999). Positive relationships between parent school involvement and public school inner-city preschoolers' development and academic performance. *School Psychology Review,* 28(3), 395-412. doi: 10.1080/02796015.1999.12085973

Navarrete, C., Wilde, J., Nelson, C., Martinez, R., and Hargett, G. (1990). Informal assessment in educational evaluation: Implications for bilingual education programs. FOCUS Occasional Papers in Bilingual Education. Washington, DC: NCBE.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009). Where we stand on responding to cultural and linguistic diversity. Retrieved from http://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globallyshared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/diversity.pdf

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2016). English Language Learners in Public Schools. Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp

O'Malley, J.M., & Valdez Pierce, L. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners: Practical approaches for teachers.* New York: Addison-Wesley.

Passarelli, A., Hall, E., & Anderson, M. (2010). A strengths-based approach to outdoor and adventure education: Possibilities for personal growth. *Journal of Experiential Education,* 33(2), 120–135. doi:10.1177/105382591003300203

Rose, H. (2006, Winter). Asset-based development for child and youth care. Reclaiming Children and Youth, 14(4), 236-240.

Shao-Ting, A.H., & Heng-Tsung, D.H. (2010). E-portfolio-based language learning and assessment. *The International Journal of Learning,* 17(1), 313-336.

Souto-Manning, M., & Ceruvu, R. (2016). Challenging and appropriating discourses of power: Listening to and learning from successful early career early childhood teachers of color. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 49*(1), 9-26. doi: 10.1080/10665684.2015.1121793

Stefanakis, E. (2002) *Multiple Intelligences and Portfolios.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Valencia, R.R., ed. 1993. Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED387279).

WIDA (2014). The early English language development standards: 2.5–5.5 years. Madison, WI: Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

Wilder, S. (2014). Effects of parent involvement on academic achievement: a meta-synthesis. *Educational Review, 66*, 377–397. doi: 10.1080/00131911.2013.780009

Zehr, M. A. (2010). Home-language surveys for ELLs under fire. *Education Week*, 29(22), 1.