



# Classroom assessment and English Language Learners: Teachers' accommodations implementation on routine math and science tests



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Math and science teachers tended not to know the proficiency levels of ELLs in their classes.
- Teachers tended to decrease accommodations implementation as student proficiency increased.
- Accommodations in students' first languages were seldom used during routine tests.
- High-stakes test accommodations were variably implemented during classroom tests.
- Children in Special Education received more accommodations than any other students.

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## ABSTRACT

In a time of unprecedented educational accountability in the U.S., this mixed-methods study was conducted to explore teacher accommodations implementation when assessing ELLs during routine math and science tests. Elementary teachers in ten Pennsylvania school districts ( $n = 213$ ) were surveyed about their testing practices and accommodations use, and interviews were conducted with fourth grade teachers ( $n = 10$ ) about their assessment practices. Findings suggest that teachers implemented and withdrew accommodations based on students' levels of English proficiency, first language accommodations were infrequently implemented in the classroom context, and that ELLs with IEPs received more accommodations than other ELLs. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the current educational climate in the United States, students in elementary school are taking more tests than ever before. On the heels of No Child Left Behind, educational accountability is on the rise through the Race to the Top program in support of Common Core State Standards in math and language arts intended to make U.S. students more competitive in a newly, global society (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2013; Maxwell, 2014). Agencies such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium have piloted and implemented new Common Core-aligned assessments during the 2014–15 school year. Such initiatives will certainly continue the trend of academic accountability through

assessment for teachers and students into the foreseeable future (PARCC, 2013; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2013).

Amidst this surge in testing, English Language Learners (ELLs) inspire additional concern. ELLs are children who have been identified to speak a language other than English at home, and are eligible for specialized language services in school to further their English language proficiency in school. The eventual goal of this assistance is to facilitate students' full participation in English-based school curriculum. In school year 2002–03, ELLs made up 8.7% of the total U.S. public school population; in school year 2012–13, that percentage had risen to 9.2%, and was estimated at 4.4 million students (NCES, 2015). ELLs continue to be one of the fastest growing demographics in schools, a reality that presents new assessment challenges for schools and teachers that have never experienced such linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms before (Ferrara & DeMauro, 2006; Young et al., 2008). In many schools, the responsibility for all content assessment, i.e.,

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testing in subjects such as math, science, social studies, and language arts, falls to classroom teachers who have little background in principles of assessment or second language acquisition (Cizek, 2007). Nonetheless, these teachers are charged with the task of evaluating the content mastery of all students, including ELLs and non-ELLs alike.

Formal classroom assessment, in the form of quizzes and tests, is a primary means by which ELL academic achievement is evaluated. Defined as “the collection, evaluation, and use of information to help teachers make better decisions” (McMillan, 2004, p. 8), classroom assessment is an important source of information by which students' scholastic performance is measured. These scores affects subsequent, consequential school and classroom-level decisions like assigning grades (Gottlieb, 2006; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002), making course placement decisions (LaCelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994; Oakes, 2005), and identifying students with learning difficulties who may need additional intervention (McMillan, 2004).

Up to this point, the literature related to classroom assessment for ELLs has focused heavily on assessments of English language proficiency. Within the language testing literature, the majority of classroom-based work has related to English proficiency tests (Brindley, 1998; Davison, 2004; Davison & Leung, 2009; Llosa, 2012; 2008; 2007; 2005; McNamara, 2001; Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Rea-Dickins, 2001; 2004), which has left questions about ELL school assessment in content areas like math and science largely unanswered. In response to this focus on testing practices, a scholarly interest in test accommodations for ELLs has developed; however, its focus up to this point has been primarily directed toward high-stakes tests (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter, & Baker, 2000; Kieffer, Lesaux, Rivera, & Francis, 2009; Li & Suen, 2012; Rivera, Stansfield, Scialdone, & Sharkey, 2000; Stansfield & Rivera, 2001; Wolf, Kim, & Kao, 2012) rather than classroom contexts.

Despite the strong influence of high-stakes tests on elementary classroom environments, to date, studies at the nexus of content classroom assessment of ELLs have been relatively sparse. In today's schools, pull-out instruction in the form of language arts replacement is a very common means by which English as a Second Language (ESL) services are provided (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002). New inclusionary efforts, such as push-in structures where ESL instruction is provided through a co-teaching model, support ELLs spending more of their time in a general classroom. These developments likely have positive aspects for ELLs in that they can gain access and exposure to mainstream content curriculum, but also may result in limited participation in English-based, unaccommodated tasks designed for proficient English speakers (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2009; Harper & deJong, 2004; Menken, 2006). The studies that have investigated how ELLs fare in mainstream classrooms have focused in large part on how teachers provide, or don't provide, access to *instruction* rather than assessment (Cho & Reich, 2008; Harklau, 1994; Reeves, 2004). Additionally, with classroom tests as routine occurrences in math and science classrooms, the content classroom becomes a compelling context in which to conduct research about assessment practices with ELLs.

The present study addresses the area of inquiry of accommodations implementation for ELLs on classroom math and science tests. To use Acosta, Rivera, and Shafer-Willner's definition, test accommodations for ELLs refer to “changes to testing procedures, testing materials, or the testing situation in order to allow students' meaningful participation in the assessment” (Acosta, Rivera, & Shafer Willner, 2008, p.vii). Providing ELL test-takers with standard accommodations, such as bilingual dictionaries or additional time, has been suggested to be a beneficial practice when assessing ELLs on high-stakes measures. Implementing accommodations

may lessen the linguistic complexity of a test and allow ELLs to better demonstrate what they know (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi et al., 2000). Though the overall effectiveness of accommodations is a matter of debate (Kieffer et al., 2009; Li & Suen, 2012; Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011), teachers are required to implement regulated, standardized accommodations on high-stakes tests as described by state guidelines.

Interestingly, many state departments of education in the United States (e.g., Pennsylvania, Texas, North Carolina, and Florida) call upon accommodations implementation in the *classroom* as a precursor for high-stakes accommodations practice during standardized tests. Taking Pennsylvania as an example, the Pennsylvania guidelines for administration of the Common Core-aligned tests (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams) clearly specify the importance of classroom assessment accommodations as a model for accommodations use on high-stakes tests, “Current accommodations used in day-to-day instruction and assessment are appropriate. New accommodations unfamiliar to students should not be introduced to students for the first time when they are taking the PSSA or Keystone Exams” (PDE, 2014, p. 5). To date, however, there has been limited empirical examination of exactly how, or indeed *if*, routine content tests are typically modified at all. As Cizek (2007) has provocatively stated.

The state of research on what constitutes an appropriate accommodation for a given pupil on a large scale assessment is still in its comparative infancy— which would mean by extension that the state of affairs in classroom assessment accommodations is essentially embryonic. (p. 112).

The aim of this study was to contribute to the literature relating to classroom-based assessment and accommodations implementation for ELLs by elementary content teachers. The following research question and sub-questions guided this study:

- 1) What are the reported accommodations implemented by elementary teachers for English Language Learners on classroom math and science tests?
  - a) Do teachers report to change accommodations implementation for ELLs at different proficiency levels?
  - b) Do teachers report to implement accommodations differently for ELLs with special needs than for other ELLs?

## 2. Theoretical framework

Within the field of language assessment, validity theory was used as a frame of reference for this study. For tests to be said to valid forms of measurement, score interpretations and the subsequent decisions made based on those scores must be defensible through a process of logical argument (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). In conjunction with validity concerns, reliability or consistency in measurement of a defined construct is a necessary component of tests because reliable assessment tools allow test results to be interpreted meaningfully (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; 2010).

A relevant component of validity theory is Bachman and Palmer's notion of test usefulness, which suggests that tests are valid if they are “developed with a specific purpose, a particular group of test takers, and a specific language domain ... in mind” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 18). Because of the fact that most standardized and routine classroom tests are designed with *native* English speakers in mind (Rivera & Collum, 2006), finding ways to appropriately and accurately assess the academic knowledge of ELLs, without changing the intended test construct, presents a significant challenge for classroom teachers. Construct-irrelevant variance is a prevailing concern when testing ELLs, and refers to high correlations between students' content performance and their

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