

English Language Proficiency Assessment Foundations: External Judgments of Adequacy The EVEA Project

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Sections of this document may be used in the creation of individual state Foundations Documents that lay out the context and components of a state’s English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) system in greater detail. Please cite as:

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Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to identify the external linguistic and developmental factors by which to judge the legitimacy of assumptions expressed in the existing English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) systems of the EVEA states. These factors include the roles of second language acquisition theories, language progressions, and the language construct definition.

The Role of Theories of Second Language Acquisition

A strong validity argument requires a theory of second language acquisition (SLA) to describe the nature and the course of language development—namely the context, function, rate, and eventual level of attainment students can or should develop in the domains of listening, speaking, reading and writing. There are a number of alternative theories of SLA to consider. Given that assessments often have multiple purposes (e.g., to measure student progress and proficiency), they may need to incorporate more than one theoretical approach (e.g., to capture a balance of both communicative and discrete grammatical skills). Alternatively, states may need to identify and prioritize the uses of their assessments to help frame the design.

The Threshold Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) suggests that a student’s knowledge of language skills must reach a critical level before the student can cognitively and academically benefit from his or her bilingualism. Estimates for the length of time necessary for a student to attain sufficient proficiency in a second language to support learning new academic content through that language have put the length of the process at five to seven years (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). These theories of SLA provide information about realistic expectations for learning new academic content through a second language.

Under the Critical/Sensitive Period Hypothesis, it is argued that students not exposed to a second language before puberty will fail to reach native-like levels of proficiency in the second language, particularly in the area of phonology (i.e., acquiring a native-like accent), (Birdsong, 1999). Such theories of SLA are helpful for setting meaningful expectations of student learning outcomes.

Second language acquisition theories that focus on affective and motivational underpinnings have identified two possible rationales for successful attainment: instrumental motivation and integrative motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Instrumental motivation has focused on rationale such as learning a language for occupational purposes, whereas integrative motivation has focused on rationale such as wanting to fit in or assimilate with the society using the second language. There is still debate about which set of motives leads to more successful language outcomes. Integrative motivation initially had the edge but this is now contested (Hoff, 2009; Schumann, 1986). Regardless, such theories show how socio-psychological factors play a role in language acquisition.

Larger socio-cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and social constructions of gender are also argued to impact the course and nature of language development (Ellis, 2008). These factors account for restricted access to: 1) effective schooling, 2) to native speakers as models of English language use, and 3) to certain varieties of English (for example exposure to different regional or social—including gendered—varieties of English rather than standard forms of English). Based on the hypothesis that both psychological and socio-cultural factors impact language development, assessment developers need to guard against personal and cultural biases (e.g., assumed common knowledge about test content), as well as be explicit about the role of standard English relative to dialects (e.g., whether to accept different varieties of spoken English for scoring procedures).

Functional theories of language acquisition (Halliday, 1985) focus on the communicative contexts in which the speakers of a second language will need to competently use their language skills. Functional or communicative theories of SLA used in assessment have their origins in the Foreign Service Institute Oral Proficiency Test, which focuses on the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency necessary for different types of positions requiring second language skills in the Foreign Service (e.g., interpreter, guard, etc.).

Second language acquisition has been theorized to follow stage-like development from a non-verbal stage when learners are first thought to be gathering data about their second language, to a terminal stage at which they may be considered fully proficient users of the second language (Tabors, 1997). See Appendix A for an example of how one state has attempted to add details about duration and language abilities to the intervening stages on a 1-5 scale.

Language acquisition theories more generally can offer specificity about the nature and the order of development in different language skill areas. At the earliest stages of language development, students may have rudimentary word, sentence, and discourse knowledge, which at a more advanced stage is broadened, and by the most advanced stages is deepened and made more sophisticated (Bailey & Heritage, 2008). For example, the complexity of linguistic features will dictate the sequencing of the acquisition of question formation in English (simple rising intonation with statements such as *This is my book?* progressing to *wh*-questions requiring the inclusion of a tensed auxiliary verb “do” as in *Where did Lewis and Clark begin their exploration?*). Bailey (2010) cautions that “assessments that will be used to measure growth or annual gains in language development must take into account theories of acquisition (e.g., attention to the order and weight given to knowledge of complex/later acquired grammatical structures)” (p. 289).

It is important to note that from a functional perspective, language proficiency is not an absolute state; rather, it can be both situational and developmental, denoting mastery of different language skills sufficient for certain contexts en route to more distant and complex language competencies (i.e., ultimate attainment goals). For example, in the K-12 arena, students may master formulating simple declarative sentences at any grade level. This mastery may constitute sufficient proficiency for situations requiring simple descriptions and thus warrants being placed at the highest level of a proficiency scale (for this particular skill). On the other hand, students may require more sophisticated grammatical constructions to access and engage with more cognitively complex content by the time they encounter, for example, high school chemistry (Byrnes & Canale, 1987; Lowe & Stansfield, 1988).

In the K-12 ELPA context, Bailey (2010) recommends that if “a communicative theory of language is adopted then tasks should capture the authentic language demands of classroom interactions between teachers and students and between students,” (p. 289). This should be done for each grade level (or at least grade-span) so that the highest levels of age and grade-appropriate proficiencies can be attained at every grade level or span, while not losing sight of developmental expectations for increasingly complex language in the upper grades.

Being cognizant of the different theories of language development allows us to define language proficiency more concretely. Specifically, an adequate definition of language proficiency must take into account the different expectations of performance suggested by theory. It must also take into account students’ age and cognitive development (Bailey, 2008; McKay, 2006) as well as grade and content-area demands. Hence, English language proficiency in a school setting can be defined as: *language ability*

across relevant modalities used at sufficient levels of sophistication to successfully perform all language-related school tasks required of students at a specific grade level (given adequate exposure and time to acquire the second language).

The Role of Language Progressions

A strong validity argument needs to show that the assessment is aligned with an understanding of the progression of language development. By operationalizing theoretical understandings of language acquisition, a continuum of progression should display how language develops from the most rudimentary forms through increasingly sophisticated competencies in terms of vocabulary, syntax and discourse. The progression represents the increasingly complex language needed to learn the increasingly complex concepts and skills reflected in the academic content standards. As highlighted in the earlier definitions of proficiency, the progression should indicate proficiency milestones—not necessarily tied to specific grade levels, given that ELL students may enroll in US schools at any age with any level of initial proficiency—but which need to be mastered along the way to reach the ultimate language proficiency goals for high levels of achievement in the content areas.

Although distinct, the language progression and the expected academic content standards are closely related. The language progression should answer the question, “what language competencies underpin the acquisition of concepts and skills?” For example, what specific language competencies would be required for a student to meet the following WA reading content standard: “Expand comprehension by analyzing, interpreting and synthesizing information and ideas in literary and informational text?” The standard makes clear the expected skills a student needs to learn. A language progression would make clear the language that students need to acquire in order to learn these skills in progressively more sophisticated forms. For example, the language structures students need for developing the analysis skills of comparing and contrasting ideas in literary text would include the use of subordinating conjunctions (*if, when, because, although*) to begin a dependent clause.

The Role of the Language Construct Definition

Both language development theories and learning progressions are necessary for articulating the *desired* English Language Development/Proficiency construct, which describes the expectations for *what* develops, *how* it develops and ultimately what it develops *for*—what language test developers call the *target language use* (TLU) (McKay, 2006). The construct should represent the context and function of the domains of language (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing), including the language skills of vocabulary, grammar and discourse in each, as well as an identified progression of how the language skills shift over time from basic to more sophisticated structures. An example of this construct would be the production of specific vocabulary levels, progressively moving from a basic lexicon of common and concrete terms to one which includes less common technical and abstract vocabulary, and from simple syntactic forms to increasingly complex ones that express higher levels of thinking.

Bailey and Heritage (2008) have distinguished among three types of language that students need to acquire in order to be competent language users in the school context: school navigational language (SNL), curriculum content language (CCL) and social language (SL). Such uses of language can be considered TLU domains that are ideally identified in the test specifications of the ELPA. An example of each is provided below along with a possible TLU task for additional clarity.

SNL: *I need you all to be facing this way before we begin.* [Follow directions]

CCL: *First, the stamen forms at the center of the flower.* [Comprehend explanations of scientific processes]

SL: *I took it [=the trash] out before [=lunch].* [Assume and use shared referents (it, before) when pragmatically appropriate]

Description of the ELP construct should show how it is representative of these three language types and show how language skills become increasingly sophisticated in each one.

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Appendix A: Stages of SLA Identified by the Louisiana Department of Education¹

- **Stage 1: Silent/Receptive or Preproduction Stage**
 - duration – 10 hours to 6 months
 - learners have 500 receptive words; words that are understood, but not comfortably used
 - may also include a *silent period*, wherein expressive communication is accomplished through a variety of strategies, such as pointing, gesturing, nodding, responding with a simple “yes” or “no,” etc.
- **Stage 2: Early Production Stage**
 - duration – an additional 6 months after Stage 1
 - learners have acquired 1000 receptive/active words; words that are understood and used
 - learners can speak in one- or two-word phrases and demonstrate comprehension by answering simple yes/no, either/or, or who/what/where questions
- **Stage 3: Speech Emergence Stage**
 - duration – an additional year after Stage 2
 - learners have acquired approximately 3000 words and use short phrases and simple sentences to communicate
 - learners begin to use dialogue; asking and answering simple questions
 - longer sentences may be produced but grammatical errors are likely
- **Stage 4: The Intermediate Language Proficiency Stage**
 - duration – an additional year after Stage 3
 - learners have acquired up to 6000 words
 - complex statements, state opinions, ask for clarification, share their thoughts, and speak at greater length
- **Stage 5: The Advanced Language Proficiency Stage**
 - duration – total of 5 -7 years
 - acquisition of grammar and specialized content vocabulary are comparable to native speaker

¹ Louisiana Department of Education. (2005). *Louisiana guidelines for identification and instruction of English language learners with a disability*. Retrieved March 15, 2010, from <http://www.doe.state.la.us/Lde/uploads/8577.pdf>.