

May 2021

Language Assessment Literacy: Analyzing the Perspectives of Mainstream Teachers Toward English Learners

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Recommended Citation

Szecsi, T., & Szilagyi, J. (2021). Language Assessment Literacy: Analyzing the Perspectives of Mainstream Teachers Toward English Learners. *Journal of English Learner Education*. (12)1. Retrieved from <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jele/vol12/iss1/3>

Language Assessment Literacy: Analyzing the Perspectives of Mainstream Teachers Toward English Learners

Introduction

Soon after my son started first grade in the United States, I—the second author—received communication from his school that he needed Academic Intervention Services in math and English language arts (ELA). Two weeks into the intervention services, we were notified that he did not need these services any longer because his content knowledge had grown in leaps and bounds. Yes, you guessed it right. My son has a language other than English, which impacted his performance on the tests he was given in English language after a long summer spent in his heritage country. Although at the time I did not know to speak up, because according to my culture it is not common to question the school's decision, this personal experience generated my professional interest in the topic. I started wondering how mainstream teachers are prepared to teach and assess English learners (ELs)¹, and how ELs are impacted by teachers' language assessment in the classroom daily.

While the number of students enrolled in public schools in the United States has been on the rise, so has the number of ELs (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). About 12 million children spoke a language other than English in the United States in 2016, and in 2017, 10.1 % of public-school students—five million students—were identified as English learners (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; NCES, 2020). Data show that ELs have struggled academically in public schools. According to the NCES (2018a), the graduation rate (i.e., percentage of students who graduate on time) of ELs in public schools in 2015-2016 was 67%,

¹ In this article, we define ELs as “students whose home languages are other than or in addition to English, and those who are deemed by assessments and educational decision-makers to be still in the process of acquiring English” (Kibler et al., 2014, p. 436).

almost equal to that of students with disabilities (66%). This is significantly less than the overall national graduation rate of 84%. In addition, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment, a comparison of the reading scale scores of ELs and non-ELs revealed a 36-point gap in their average scale score at the 4th-grade level and a 42-point gap in their average scale score at the 8th-grade level in 2017 (NCES, 2018b). This achievement gap and the low graduation rate of ELs demonstrate the often ineffective instruction that ELs receive and ultimately it places these students in a less optimal situation for a college career and/or future jobs and a professional career (Contreras & Fujimoto, 2019).

Although several programs exist nationwide to teach ELs in schools—such as English as a Second Language [ESL], Sheltered English/Structured English Immersion, bilingual, and dual language immersion/two-way bilingual—most ELs are placed in mainstream classrooms. Because of the existing achievement gap between ELs and native English speakers, it is important to examine the language assessment literacy and classroom practices of mainstream teachers, including the types of assessments teachers use and the ways they use assessment data to guide instruction and help ELs learn. Therefore, the goal of this article is to report the findings of a study which delved into the language assessment literacy and language assessment practices of mainstream classroom teachers in Florida and to understand their use of language proficiency assessments to improve ELs' learning and instruction.

Literature Review

Preparedness of Teachers to Teach and Assess English Learners

Mainstream teachers need to possess a wide spectrum of knowledge regarding linguistic and academic development in order to design instruction, create and use assessments, and interpret assessment data daily to identify a best pathway for instruction for these students. The

expectations and regulations related to teachers' competencies for teaching English learners in mainstream classrooms varies by state. For example, in Florida, all elementary education teachers in public schools are mandated to hold an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) endorsement, which requires teachers to have a (a) Bachelor's degree or higher in a subject area and (b) the completion of 15 college credit hours in topics related to ESOL, including methods of teaching ESOL, ESOL curriculum and materials development, cross-cultural communication, applied linguistics and testing and evaluation of ESOL. Teachers usually earn the ESOL endorsement either in the teacher preparation program or through their in-service professional development at the school district (FLDOE, 2020). However, over 30 states do not require teachers to complete additional training in topics and competencies related to teaching ELs (Education Commission of the State, 2014).

In order to effectively teach the growing population of ELs, there has been a call for highly qualified teachers who can work effectively with ELs in a linguistically diverse mainstream classroom (Villegas, 2018). Several researchers advocate to better prepare teachers to work with ELs, and to offer more effective professional development for teachers to meet the needs of ELs (Hedge et al., 2018). Teacher preparedness starts with their beliefs about ELs. For example, Pettit (2011) found a wide variety of negative perceptions including frustration, blame, and a perceived lack of abilities and lack of effort mainstream teachers might hold about ELs. In addition, research shows that mainstream teachers can have various misconceptions about ELs, including that they should not use their native language at school, and that they can learn the English language in one or two years (Reeves, 2006). Importantly, teachers' beliefs have an impact on their classroom practices. For example, Yoon (2008) found that classroom approaches

and practices were impacted by teachers' self-perception as teachers for all students versus teachers for regular education students and subject area teachers.

In addition to teachers' misconceptions, preparation for teaching ELs in a mainstream classroom seems to remain an area to improve. For example, Besterman et al. (2018) found that although the number of ELs with whom STEM teachers work increased, the number of STEM teachers who participated in professional development focused on ELs had not increased proportionately. Consequently, Besterman and colleagues (2018) advocated for additional efforts to better prepare STEM teachers to teach the growing EL population. Similarly, numerous other studies have called for better preparation of teachers to teach ELs (e.g., Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010; Hedge et al., 2018; Li & Peters, 2020; Samson & Collins, 2012; Villegas, 2018).

In addition, teachers' perceptions of their own preparedness to teach ELs varies widely. According to Coady et al. (2011), graduates of an elementary teacher education program in Florida, whose preparation involves the completion of several ESOL courses, believed that they had been well-prepared to teach ELs. On the other hand, although Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) found that the pre-service teachers in their study felt prepared to teach ELs, the observations conducted by the researchers did not confirm their preparedness to work with this student population. In addition, Hedge et al. (2018) found that although the participating kindergarten teachers in North Carolina had felt prepared to work with ELs, they learned what they really had to know when they were in the classroom. These teachers expressed a need for and interest in more professional development. Similarly, elementary teachers in Wissink and Starks's study (2019) expressed a desire for more preparation, including coursework and practice during student teaching focused on teaching ELs in teacher preparation programs. Well-designed, innovative professional development can positively impact the knowledge, skills, and

practices of teachers, to improve English learners' development. For example, Li and Peters (2020) found significant improvement in teachers' second language knowledge and strategies used when working with ELs as a result of an innovative professional development program that embedded research and service components.

Although numerous studies have examined the attitudes of teachers toward ELs, the preparedness of mainstream teachers to teach ELs, teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELs, and strategies used to teach ELs, there has been a lack of research related to mainstream teachers' preparedness to assess ELs and their assessment practices related to ELs. Although the literature has focused extensively on the testing of ELs, including issues of validity in testing ELs (Winke et al., 2018) test accommodations for ELs (Abedi, 2014; Koran & Kopriva, 2017; Li & Suen, 2012a, 2012b; Turkan & Oliveri, 2014), and formative assessments for ELs (Román et al., 2019; Ruiz-Primo et al., 2014), little is known about if and how mainstream teachers use these language proficiency assessments in their classrooms to make instructional decisions.

Assessment Literacy and Language Assessment Literacy for Teachers

Assessment literacy of teachers is a key ingredient to quality education (Popham, 2018). Assessment literacy is defined as “an individual's understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions” (Popham, 2018, p. 2). To summarize key competencies related to classroom and accountability assessments, several standards and competency lists for teachers' assessment knowledge and skills exist (Brookhart, 2011; Coombe et al., 2020; DeLuca & Bellara, 2013; Popham, 2018). More recently, a growing interest in the assessment literacy of foreign/world language teachers contributed to the definition of language assessment literacy (LAL) for second language teachers. For example,

according to Giraldo (2018), “knowledge of language, language use and language pedagogy differentiate LAL from assessment literacy” (p. 180). In an attempt to define the knowledge, skills and principles included in the LAL of second language teachers. Fulcher (2012) collected survey data on the assessment training needs of language teachers, while Giraldo (2018) provided a core list of LAL for language teachers, including the following descriptors of LAL (for a complete list, see Giraldo, 2018, p. 188-190):

1. Awareness of applied linguistics
2. Awareness of theory and concepts
3. Awareness of own language assessment context
4. Instructional skills
5. Design skills for language assessments
6. Skills in educational measurement
7. Technological skills
8. Awareness of and actions towards critical issues in language assessment

Researchers have also identified the knowledge and skills necessary for mainstream teachers to effectively work with ELs. According to Samson and Collins (2012), for example, the knowledge and skills important for effectively working with ELs in the mainstream classroom include (a) an understanding to support oral language development, (b) to explicitly teach academic English language, and (c) to value cultural diversity and inclusivity. In addition, according to Popham (2018), assessing ELs should be included in the content of professional development on assessment literacy for teachers. However, it is also important to specify what knowledge and skills specific to the assessment of ELs would be important for teachers. For example, the Florida Teacher Standards for ESOL Endorsement (2010) list standards regarding assessment of ELs such as (a) Assessment issues for ELs, (b) Language proficiency assessment, and (c) Classroom-based assessment for ELs.

Although language assessment literacy has been defined for second language teachers, there has not been any research exploring language assessment literacy of teachers as it relates to working with ELs in the mainstream classroom. In this paper, we argue that given the rapidly growing numbers of ELs in mainstream classrooms, all teachers are language teachers. To be able to support ELs in their classrooms, all teachers need to possess language assessment literacy. Therefore, the goal of our study is to examine mainstream teachers' language assessment literacy as it relates to ELs. The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Language assessment literacy, as defined by Giraldo (2018). We aimed to answer the following research question: What language proficiency assessments do mainstream teachers use to measure English language proficiency of ELs, and how do they use these assessments to improve student learning and instruction?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenology approach (Moustakas, 1994) because we aimed to explore the lived experiences of mainstream teachers related to language proficiency assessment for ELs. The phenomenological approach is appropriate for gaining understanding of the meaning people make of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), as related to the phenomenon of language assessment literacy (Patton, 2002). For this study, we developed an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions in order to gain an understanding of mainstream teachers' experiences with and use of language proficiency assessment with ELs. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and the data were analyzed for emerging themes to answer the research question.

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in two school districts in Southwest Florida. School district #1 has almost 96,000 students, of which 32% speak a language other than English at home, and 13.5% identified as ELs. This district is the 5th most diverse district in Florida with 43.7 % Hispanic students. In the district, 51% of the students receive free and reduced lunch (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 2020). School district #2 has almost 48,000 students, out of which 50.5% speak a language other than English at home and 15.3% identified as ELs. This is also an ethnically and racially diverse district with 52.3% Hispanic students. Furthermore, 61.7% of students live in economically disadvantaged households (FLDOE, 2020).

The identification and placement of ELs are regulated by the Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy, Inc. (META) Consent Decree in Florida. The Consent Decree is a court document to enforce an agreement between Florida Board of Education and a coalition of eight multicultural and multilingual groups regarding the identification and services for students whose native language other than English (FLDOE, n.d.). In alignment with this decree, at school registration, parents complete the Home Language Survey, which has three questions about language use at home. When parents indicate that a language other than English is used in the home, students are assessed with the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA) to identify their language needs (FLDOE, n.d.). CELLA measures English language proficiency in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, other assessments are used to identify non-English speaking students' academic and linguistic needs. For example, Aprenda is used with new students from Spanish-speaking countries to measure their abilities in reading and math in Spanish. When students receive additional language services based on the placement assessment, every spring the World-Class Instructional Design

and Assessment (WIDA)-ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 is administered to monitor progress. These results are used to determine the students' needs, guide instruction, and determine the students' readiness for exiting the ESOL program (Florida ACCESS, n.d.).

Sampling and Participants

We used purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study. To be included in the study, we considered teachers in two school districts in Southwest Florida who had ELs in their classrooms. A total of 55 teachers participated; including 49 females and five males; one did not report gender. Regarding their teaching experience, 11 participants had taught for 1-5 years, 21 teachers had taught for 6-15 years, and 18 had taught for over 16 years, and five teachers did not report the years of teaching. In terms of the current grade level in which they were teaching at time of data collection, 16 taught K through 2nd grades, 23 were in 3rd through 5th grades, four were in 6th through 8th grades, six were in 9th through 12th grades, and six did not report grade levels. All of the participating teachers held ESOL endorsement, including 34 who received this endorsement during their college studies, 11 who received it through in-service training, three were grandfathered, six held a Master's degree in ESOL, and one did not report.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

First, permission to conduct the study was secured. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying characteristics of the participants were removed from the data, and each participant was assigned a code (e.g., T-1, T-2). Data were gathered from spring 2017 through spring 2019. To gain information regarding the teachers' perception of language proficiency assessments, we used semi-structured interviews with nine open-ended inductive questions including "What language assessments do you use to evaluate the progress of ELs?" and "How do you use

language assessment data in your curricular decisions? Provide specific examples.” We conducted individual face-to-face interviews with each participant, and the interviews were audiotaped. The interviews lasted no longer than 30-40 minutes each, and we took field notes during the interviews.

Each researcher completed a data analysis chart. Through this process, we created categories for coding and identifying patterns and connections in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To ensure trustworthiness, we addressed issues of credibility and transferability (Creswell, 2007). Thus, utilizing multiple data sources, including face-to-face interviews, and field-notes as well as in-depth analysis techniques were vital. In addition, we employed a peer-review strategy, during which two external readers (i.e., graduate students as peer debriefers) read and analyzed interview transcripts independently, checked field notes for evidence, and compared emergent themes and assertions to verify them from the original data.

Findings

This study explored language assessment literacy of mainstream teachers as it is related to English learners. Three major themes and four subthemes emerged based on the interviews:

Theme 1: knowledge of language proficiency assessments, including four subthemes: (a) awareness of language proficiency assessments, (b) one size fits all: misuse of content assessment, (c) language proficiencies confined solely to reading skills, and (d) preference for formative assessment

Theme 2: use of language assessment results to drive instruction, and

Theme 3: deficit views of English learners

Knowledge of Language Proficiency Assessments

The teachers' knowledge about English language proficiency assessments varied widely. Only half of the participants (28 teachers) were aware of the language proficiency assessments that are used in Florida for ELs, while the other 27 teachers did not mention them at all when they were asked about English language proficiency assessments.

Awareness of Language Proficiency Assessments

Half of the 28 teachers who were aware of language proficiency assessments such as the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA), the Language Assessment Battery (LAB), and WIDA-ACCESS 2.0, demonstrated adequate understanding of the administration of the assessments. However, the other half had either incorrect or vague concepts of these assessments. Most teachers were aware that these assessments measure proficiency in the four language areas of speaking, reading, listening, and writing, but only a few gave substantial details about the nature and scoring of the assessments. In addition, some of the teachers appreciated that ELs who arrived from a Spanish-speaking country were also assessed in their native language to measure their level of academic performance in their native language. For example, T-34 said "I think it is great that they offer these tests in different languages because this allows the student to focus on the content rather than understanding the questions or reading it". In addition, another teacher noted the following about Aprenda, which is a Spanish-language assessment of grade-level math and reading:

Those results [from Aprenda] are given to me. My understanding is if the child is working on grade level Spanish, then they only need to learn the new language. If the child is low in their native language, then I will see more issues than just language acquisition.

All of the 28 teachers who were aware of language proficiency assessments pointed out that in their schools, administrators, and ESOL program coordinators conducted these assessments without involving the classroom teachers. Only a few teachers mentioned that the results of these assessments were shared with them. However, some teachers expressed their interest and need for seeing the results. For example, T-49 said, “I want to see what his [an English learner’s] WIDA score is to determine what I should do for him.” In addition, some teachers noted that at the beginning of the year, they want to see students’ scores and use it as a baseline for better understanding the progress their ELs make during the year. For example, T-48 noted, “the teachers don’t get access to the report or the scores, so I don’t know particularly what their gains are from the beginning of the year when they were originally tested.” Because the assessment is administered by the ESOL teacher or ESOL paraprofessional and in most cases there is a gap in communicating the results with classroom teachers, T-48 would like to have more collaboration. She noted, “I would like to have more involvement with an ESOL paraprofessional or an ESOL teacher. It is kind of limited here.”

Some of the teachers who seemed knowledgeable about the language assessments expressed a concern regarding students’ placement and exit from the ESOL services. For example, T-24 mentioned that some students who demonstrated sufficient English language skills on WIDA, but were unable to pass the statewide standardized tests in grade-level reading remained in the ESOL program. She elaborated, “when students can’t exit the program because they didn’t score a 3 on the FSA [Florida Standards Assessment], that drives me nuts. It has nothing to do with language... they just struggle with reading.” She found this practice inappropriate because the needs of ELs are different from the needs of struggling readers. Other teachers echoed this concern by saying that when ELs maintain the LY status—actively

receiving ESOL services—just because of the inability to pass the grade-level reading test, their need for reading strategies might remain unanswered in a regular ESOL program. On the other hand, for example, T-14 called attention to the issue of a premature exit. She discussed that some students may have mastered oral English for every day but have yet to develop their academic English skills. She thought ESOL services would be beneficial to foster the academic English proficiencies for these students.

The 27 teachers who failed to refer to these language proficiency assessments mainly discussed grade level content assessments, such as STAR tests and other formative assessments like observations and portfolios, without demonstrating their awareness of specific language proficiency assessments for ELs.

One Size Fits All: Misuse of Content Assessment

Most teachers expressed that they use grade-level content assessments to measure all students' progress in the content areas, such as reading, math, and science. They also used these assessments to understand the language proficiency of ELs and their needs. For example, T-32 said, "I give the same content assessment to every student, regardless of their status." Likewise, T-6 emphasized that all kindergarteners, including ELs, are required to meet regular grade-level standards; therefore, "We administer quarterly letter/sound assessments, concept of print assessments, reading assessments, math and science assessments. In addition, we collect reading and math data through our online i-Ready." These answers imply that the content knowledge and skills of ELs are measured using assessments that probably have not been normed for ELs, and their language proficiency certainly affects their performance on the assessment.

Proficiencies Confined Solely to Reading Skills

When the participants were asked about their understanding of the language proficiency of ELs, in most cases they solely discussed reading skills, disregarding speaking, listening, and writing skills. Many teachers described how they assessed phonograms, sight words, blending and segmenting sounds, and the concept of print. T-12 noted that the language assessments for ELs happened in the reading block to measure progress in their ability to read and work with print, vocabulary and word structure. Similar to many other participants, she did not mention any oral skills in English to be included. Kindergarten teachers especially narrowed their focus on the letter and sound relationships as the main area for language development. For instance, T-20 stated, “For assessing my current EL students’ language development, I refer to our MAP Reading tests which compare each student’s score to our school, the district and the national average.”

Preference for Formative Assessment

Most teachers preferred to use formative assessment to measure all students’ learning, including ELs. For example, T-2 stated that she created weekly formative assessments based on district summative assessments, which she used after a series of mini lessons. T-22 also added, “I do formative assessments a lot. Usually do a quick check on them daily making sure they are getting the learning goal.” Another teacher highlighted performance –based assessments with ELs, and noted:

By using informal assessments, I can target the student’s specific problem areas, and ... assess my EL student’s language proficiency. An example for a performance-based assessment would be having students give oral reports and presentations in class.” In addition, several teachers mentioned observation as an appropriate assessment. (T-11)

Furthermore, T-14 noted that she tended to avoid written tests because they caused anxiety and children became nervous. She kept records of observation of ELs, conferred with the ESOL teacher, and then made a conclusion of the ELs' progress and proficiency level.

Use of Language Assessment Result to Drive Instruction

Teachers used assessment data for making curricular and instructional decisions to various extents. Only a few shared examples of accessing and considering data from language proficiency assessments to be used for instruction. For example, T-39 described how she used the *WIDA Can Do Chart* that focuses on what ELs can do at a given proficiency level to avoid a focus on the missing skills. She said, "WIDA Can Do statements are helpful in knowing where a child is currently performing in the areas of listening, reading, writing, and speaking so that instructional planning can be specific in meeting their needs." Only one teacher gave an example for adjusting the class activities to include the ELs' cultural and experiential background. T-40 mentioned, "for reading I choose a book that is more appropriate to cultural background and experiences; in this way they can relate better to the text and illustration." In addition, T-14 elaborated on strategies that he used after assessing ELs' language skills,

I have used the method of having students think we are playing a game whereby they may answer by clapping, rolling their thumb up or down. I use whatever [activities] that can detect their potentials.

All other examples targeted the gaps in ELs' knowledge and skills and the accommodations to address these gaps. Moreover, almost all examples for accommodation or differentiated instruction were based on content assessment data that were collected from all students. It is important to keep in mind that these assessments (e.g., i Ready, STAR) were not designed and validated for ELs; therefore, the validity of the results might be jeopardized, which in turn might

negatively affect instruction. Moreover, some teachers just relied on their intuition about the students' needs. T-42 described her planning as,

I think I just know where they are all at, so I know when I need to add more pictures ... because the vocabulary is hard for them. I have it in the back of my mind, where they are, and what they already know before I teach something and then knowing when I need to backtrack...

On the other hand, many teachers used the results of formative assessments for instructional decisions. They gave numerous examples for grouping students, revisiting, and re-teaching certain topics when the results indicated a gap and a need for additional instruction.

Some teachers stated that they have no control over curriculum and instruction for ELs.

For instance, T-50 elaborated on this lack of control:

I specifically do not make these decisions when it comes to EL students. The school provides me with basic syllabus and lesson plans... I will make minor adjustments as I go but overall, I stick to that one made by the school because it is what is required for the students to learn what is needed for them to take the state standardized tests.

Overall, teachers employed assessment, mainly content assessment and formative assessment results, to make instructional decisions. However, most teachers failed to utilize the language proficiency assessment results, either due to a lack of access to these assessment results or a lack of awareness and familiarity with these assessments. They preferred using the results of grade-level content assessment to accommodate ELs' learning needs.

Deficit Views of English Learners

Some teachers expressed overt and/or covert deficit views about English learners.

Although the focus of the interviews was language proficiency assessment, it was impossible not

to notice the deficit views as some teachers described their experiences about ELs. Several teachers referred to ELs as “monolingual” instead of using other terminologies such as emergent bilinguals, or ELs. The context made it clear that these children are not monolingual Spanish speakers, but students who are learning a second language and already have achieved some level of proficiency in English. For example, when T-54 explained the assessment data for all ELs in her class, she stated, “the para [professional] keeps track of the data about the monolingual kids,” referring to all ELs as monolinguals. Even T-33, who sounded knowledgeable about assessment and the positive impact of students’ first language, consistently used the word ‘monolingual’ for students with good English proficiency. She noted, “For instance, this year I have three monolingual students. Student A came here in April and is already scoring on grade level with the English STAR test...”. Clearly, if the student’s reading proficiency in English was at grade level, they were not monolingual but emergent bilingual. These teachers fail to realize that the real monolinguals in the classroom were the native English speakers who did not speak another language, and often the teachers themselves.

Similarly, a deficit view emerged from T-31’s description of a group of ELs in her classroom, stating, “there is nothing much lower.” In addition, she mentioned, “people come here and speak nothing.” This statement completely ignores the students’ native language skills while focusing on the lack of English skills as an only descriptor of ELs. The ignorance of the native language was reinforced by another teacher, who put the blame on parents for speaking their native language with their children. T-44 believed that the lack of students’ academic success can be attributed to the use of their native language in the family. She noted, “if the parent is only ever speaking Spanish and we [teachers] are the only ones speaking English, that child’s not going to pull it all together.”

A few teachers noted that they grouped ELs together with students who have various disabilities and they used the same strategies with all these students, thus not distinguishing between EL's language development needs and other students' cognitive, learning, or behavioral needs. Moreover, T-31, who was a teacher in an inclusion classroom, expressed her frustration and limits in a challenging learning situation. Her words expressed the overt view of ELs as a burden in the classroom,

I think that putting a monolingual student into a classroom with a teacher and other students that do not speak the same language as them can be very stressful for the student, and as much as the teacher wants to, there is a limit to the things they can/have time to/or know how to do to reach the student.

Although these deficit views were not dominant among teachers, these views were present and expressed. These teachers seemed to perceive the native language and culture as a burden and a lack of value instead of being an asset and a treasure in the classroom.

Discussion

This study explored Florida mainstream teachers' language assessment literacy as it relates to ELs. Mainstream teachers in Florida are responsible for providing equal access to instruction and educational services for all ELs, as mandated by the META Consent Decree (FDOE, n.d.). Therefore, knowledge of language proficiency assessments and the use of assessment results to drive instruction is instrumental for all classroom teachers in Florida.

The findings indicated that teachers in this study did not utilize the results of the language proficiency assessments for two reasons: either they were unaware of the existence and administration of the language proficiency assessments for the identification and the progress of ELs, or they did not receive or did not consider the results, though some were aware of the

assessments. In Florida, the WIDA ACCESS is to be administered by “a state-level certified educator, district-level certified educator, school personnel (including temporary certifications for new teachers and certified substitute teachers), or paraprofessional articulate in English” (Florida ACCESS, n.d. p. 2). In this study, no teachers administered WIDA but in their schools, either administrators or ESOL paraprofessionals were in charge of these assessments. Because the results were not shared or reviewed by the classroom teachers, they did not use these results for designing instruction, accommodations, and differentiated lessons for ELs. Due to this gap in “communication” between teachers and test administrators, invaluable data, which required much time, effort, and financial resources to produce, was often lost, thus hindering data-driven decisions for classroom instruction. Similar to the findings of this study, Clark-Gareca (2016) found that 65% of Pennsylvania elementary teachers who participated in their study did not know their EL students’ proficiency levels or WIDA scores.

Teachers in this study demonstrated a narrow conceptualization of English language proficiency, focusing only on reading skills which were further constricted to phonological skills. This focus on reading comprehension is consistent with existing research. For example, Levi and Inbar-Lourie (2020) found in their study of English and Hebrew teachers that in teacher-created assessments, reading comprehension was the most prevalent skill. Although phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary are essential components of reading and language proficiency for ELs, other language competences and skills are equally important (Irujo, 2007). Even though a few teachers mentioned speaking, listening, and writing skills as well, none of them referred to any other components of communicative competence, such as grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Yule, 2020). This narrow concept of language proficiency became an even more critical issue when teachers stated that they were

assessing language proficiency with regular grade level assessments in reading, math, and science. When a subject area assessment, which targets the specific disciplinary knowledge, is used for measuring language proficiency, the results will be biased due to the lack of content validity; thus, incorrect conclusions for instruction can be drawn (Sireci & Faulkner-Bond, 2015). Indeed, academic English proficiency is different from content knowledge (Wolf et al., 2008), and as a result ELs who struggle with language tend to show less content knowledge and skills on assessments than what they actually know. Although Siegel (2007) found that modifying assessments to make them more equitable for ELs is difficult because language and content interact, the validity issue of assessments for ELs remains an important research area.

The teachers in this study seemed to advocate for the use of formative assessments and informal assessments, including portfolios, observations, and performance-based assessments such as presentations to measure ELs' language proficiency. Most of their discourse supported these assessments due to the low-anxiety environment in which teachers can collect the assessment data and gain a more comprehensive insight into ELs' language proficiencies in authentic tasks. This finding is interesting in light of research that showed that teacher candidates were more confident in using summative assessment and less confident with formative assessment (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). Moreover, teachers in this study offered a variety of ideas for accommodations for ELs based on their formative and informal assessment data. Similarly, teachers in several school districts in Pennsylvania made accommodations for ELs on classroom assessments based on their perceptions of the students' English proficiency, instead of relying on WIDA data (Clark-Gareca, 2016). Nonetheless, teachers' purposeful planning for differentiation based on formative assessments might suggest that with an access to language proficiency

assessment, such as WIDA and CELLA, these teachers would make more proper accommodation for ELs which would foster their English proficiencies in all areas.

The findings also showed that some teachers held a deficit view of ELs, assuming that their native language and culture has no benefits to offer in the new language learning process. Referring to them as monolinguals or someone who “speaks nothing” indicates the perception of superiority of the English language and the perception of other languages as inferior ones. The danger of this deficit view of ELs is not only detrimental for ELs’ self-perception and identity, but it might negatively affect other children’s perception of their EL peers considering ELs as a burden and an individual without any skills. Aligned with this deficit view, research provided consistent evidence of the teachers’ low expectations on ELs’ academic performance (Sharkey & Layzer, 2000). Thus, the more teachers fail to validate the funds of knowledge and the importance of ELs’ native language, the less ELs will rely on these important foundations in the learning process, which will probably hinder their academic progress (González et al., 2005). A decade ago, Rosa (2010) had already called attention to “languagelessness” (i.e., teachers’ perception of bilingual Latino students), which might hinder the use of both languages for learning. Regardless of the many decades of research and theories that argue for a critical and just approach toward bilingualism (Bartolome, 2004; Nieto, 2002; Palmer & Martinez, 2013), the deficit view is still present in teachers’ discourse.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to examine mainstream teachers’ language assessment literacy as they assess ELs and use the data for instructional decisions. The study findings indicated these teachers in Florida had an often-limited understanding of the language proficiency assessments, they hardly used the results of these assessments, and they often used assessments with a narrow

focus and invalid assessments to measure language proficiency. Though this qualitative phenomenological study did not aim to offer generalizable findings and we can only definitively conclude the views and experiences of our participants, it is not unreasonable to conclude that teachers elsewhere in Florida as well as throughout the United States may share their perspectives. Another limitation of this study is that data collection relied on self-described pedagogical practices without completing observations in the classrooms. Therefore, future studies should include structured observations to use as a tool to validate teachers' self-reported practices.

Based on this study's findings, several recommendations can be made to increase teachers' language assessment literacy in order to further improve the learning opportunities for ELs.

1. A consistent, on-going and effective system for sharing language proficiency assessment (WIDA, CELLA) results between assessment administrators and classroom teachers should be designed and maintained to ensure that the assessment results are available and used for classroom instruction.
2. To benefit from this sharing, classroom teachers should develop a solid understanding of the nature and interpretation of language proficiency assessments. In addition, they should use these assessment scores as a compass for lesson planning, in order to incorporate activities that target specific language skills (Clark-Gareca, 2016).
3. To avoid the use of assessment data collected on subject area assessments for measuring language proficiency, classroom teachers need to have a clear understanding of the content validity of assessments, and use them for appropriate purposes.
4. To eliminate the deficit views of ELs, teachers must develop their understanding of the benefits of the native language and culture on ELs' language and academic development, and social and social-emotional well-being.

These skills and competencies should receive more attention in teacher preparation programs and in in-service professional development. Only with this appreciation can teachers create a just and inclusive learning environment.

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