

How language proficiency standardized assessments inequitably impact Latinx long-term English learners

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Abstract

Latinx students make up 77.8% of the English learner (EL) population in the United States (Department of Education, 2017). However, there is a subpopulation of Latinx ELs who are: English-dominant, born in the United States, and identified as long-term English learner (LTEL). ELs who are not reclassified after 6 or 7 years are categorized as LTEL (Clark- Gareca et al., 2019). The focus of this paper is how language proficiency standardized assessments inequitably impact Latinx LTELs. We use Flores and Rosa's raciolinguistic ideologies (2015) to analyze the inequitable language opportunities Latinx LTELs experience because of standardized tests. A raciolinguistic perspective "shifts the focus from the linguistic practices of the speaker/writer toward the perceiving practices of the listener/reader" (Flores, 2020, p. 24). We argue that standardized assessments serve as both the listener/reader and the institutional mechanism that causes Latinxs to be overrepresented as LTELs and underrepresented in dual-language (DL) and Seal of Biliteracy programs. We conclude that language proficiency standardized assessments do not reflect the actual language abilities of Latinx LTELs (Brooks, 2018). Instead, we propose the use of EL portfolios to demonstrate proficiency in English (Winke & Zhang, 2019).

KEYWORDS

Latinx LTELs, raciolinguistic ideologies, English-dominant ELs, language proficiency standardized assessments

1 | INTRODUCTION

I (the first author) am a language acquisition teacher at a public charter school in Massachusetts. I teach students who are classified as English learners (EL) at the secondary grade level. In this role, I have observed a subpopulation of ELs who were born in the United States, are English-dominant, and identified as long-term English learners (LTEL). Currently, there is no universal definition of LTEL (Clark-Gareca, Short, Lukes, & Sharp-Ross, 2019); however, this population is generally identified as ELs who have been so classified for at least six or seven years (Slama, 2014).

This article uses Flores and Rosa's (2015) raciolinguistic ideologies framework to understand the categorization of Latinx English-dominant LTELs. Raciolinguistic ideologies explain how Latinx students, through systemic racialization, are perceived as linguistically deficient (Brooks, 2018; N. Flores & Rosa, 2015) and their home language practices as inadequate (N. Flores, 2020). In order to move away from this deficit-based perspective, a raciolinguistic approach "shifts the focus from the linguistic practices of the speaker/writer toward the perceiving practices of the listener/reader" (N. Flores, 2020, p. 24). We argue that standardized assessments embody the expectations of the white listening/reading subject. We focus on standardized assessments as the listener/reader because they play a central role in the classification and reclassification of ELs, and determine "full proficiency in any language" (Fillmore, 2014, p. 635) in dual-language (DL) and Seal of Biliteracy programs. We conclude that standardized assessments are systemic mechanisms that determine the classification and categorization of racialized multilingual students, and propose EL portfolios (Winke & Zhang, 2019) as an alternative measure for language proficiency.

2 | LATINXS OVERREPRESENTED AS ELs AND LTELs

The process of being identified as EL and later LTEL reflects how many linguistically proficient Latinxs are positioned as both linguistically and academically deficient until they attain "academic" English (Rosa, 2019). "Academic" English in these instances is measured by standardized assessments, which do not reflect the "actual English abilities" of ELs (Brooks, 2018, p. 226), particularly LTELs. During the initial EL screening process, families are required to complete a home language survey (HLS) indicating if a language other than English is spoken at home. If a language other than English is reported on the HLS, the student is required to take an English proficiency assessment. If the student does not meet the minimum score, they are classified as EL (OELA, 2018).

Latinx students comprise 77.8% of the EL population in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In addition, approximately 70% of ELs are born in the United States (Bialik, Scheller, & Walker, 2018). This is significant because it highlights the number of ELs who are Latinx and born in the United States. While these Latinx students may speak a language other than English at home, they experience an "abrupt shift" (C. Flores, Gürel, & Putnam, 2020, p. 5) in the school environment that is English-dominant. English-only environments limit the

opportunities for heritage speakers (HS) to develop their expressive skills in the heritage language (HL). While we agree that English-only environments promote English dominance, the goal of this article is not to perpetuate deficit narratives that Latinx English-dominant LTELs “don’t” have Spanish or “can’t” speak Spanish. Instead, we are interested in the systemic practices that contribute to inequitable language opportunities for Latinx English-dominant LTELs in standardized test-taking.

In order to reclassify as former English learners (FEL), ELs must demonstrate English proficiency on a standardized assessment that tests four language domains: listening, reading, writing, and speaking (OLEA, 2018). The term LTEL was initially developed to account for a subpopulation of ELs who were considered unable to achieve English proficiency, despite being in school for many years (Kibler & Valdés, 2016; Olsen, 2010). Therefore, passing the English proficiency standardized assessment is a crucial systemic barrier in being reclassified. In a longitudinal study, Slama (2014) found that non-Spanish-speaking ELs were reclassified “nearly *twice* that of their Spanish-speaking EL classmates” (p. 220, emphasis added by authors). In both instances, the English proficiency standardized assessment determines whether the student is classified as EL and reclassified as FEL.

3 | LATINXS UNDERREPRESENTED IN DUAL-LANGUAGE AND SEAL OF BILITERACY PROGRAMS

Although Latinxs are overrepresented as ELs and LTELs, they are underrepresented in accessing dual-language (DL) programs (Valdez, Freire, & Delavan, 2016) and participating in Seal of Biliteracy programs (Subtirelu, Borowczyk, Thorson Hernández, & Venezia, 2019). Standardized language assessments in this context are critiqued for not capturing the lived experiences of HS or their “fluid bililingualism” (N. Flores & García, 2017, p. 21). Unlike white children in the United States, Latinxs are not praised for being bilingual or supported in the development of their HL (N. Flores & Rosa, 2015). Ortega (2020) argues that HS are often expected to develop their HL “naturalistically and ... maintain their home language at their own risk” (p. 38).

In 2017, 35 states offered DL programs, but it is unclear how many DL programs there are nationally (OLEA, 2017) and how these programs are concentrated by state with large numbers of HS students. In Massachusetts, only 14 districts (3%) offer DL programs (Massachusetts Language Opportunity Coalition, 2015). In the United States, children are more likely to attend a school that has English-only instruction, in which most teachers are white and monolingual (Pennington, Brock, Salas, & Gavelek, 2019). Valdés (2005) suggests that HS should have access to instruction of their HL to further develop it and expand their “receptive proficiencies into productive grammars” (p. 417). However, even if Latinxs have access to DL programs, they might continue to receive inequitable opportunities to develop their HL. DL programs have been found to prioritize the language instruction of white English-speaking students in order to secure parent funding and interest in DL programs (N. Flores & García, 2017; Valdez et al., 2016). N. Flores, Phuong, and Venegas (2020) also found that DL programs implemented monoglossic language ideologies—“that privileged standard forms of English and Spanish and advocated their strict separation for assessment purposes” (p. 634). In that study, Latinx students who were EL classified yet English-dominant were perceived by teachers as “just low in general” (p. 631). In this instance, teachers engaged in “discourses of languagelessness” (Rosa, 2016, p.162) by perceiving these Latinx students as not being proficient in English or Spanish.

Latinx ELs are also underrepresented in the group of students who receive the Seal of Biliteracy award. The Seal of Biliteracy award recognizes a student's proficiency in English and a second language—a foreign language or HL (Seal of Biliteracy, 2021). In order to receive the Seal of Biliteracy, a student must demonstrate mastery of “standard academic English and any other language,” noting that foreign language assessments should align with “World Language Standards” (Seal of Biliteracy, 2021). While there is no universal assessment required to obtain the Seal of Biliteracy award, standardized assessments remain central in their role as the gatekeeper of linguistic adequacy of racialized students. In 2018, only 11% of ELs in Massachusetts received the Seal of Biliteracy award (MATSOL, 2018). Subtirelu et al. (2019) found that low-income students of color were less likely to participate in Seal of Biliteracy programs in California compared to white middle-class students. This is similar to the metaphorical “gentrification” of DL programs, which have been co-opted by white middle-class families (Valdez et al., 2016; Williams, 2017). While DL and Seal of Biliteracy programs message support for the bilingualism of Latinx children, they marginalize minoritized students even further (N. Flores & García, 2017; Subtirelu et al., 2019; Valdez et al., 2016).

4 | RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We have identified the role of standardized language assessments as the systemic mechanism that serves as a barrier for Latinx English-dominant LTELs to be reclassified, as well as their role in limiting opportunities for racialized students to have access to DL and Seal of Biliteracy programs. Educators working with ELs and LTELs need to be aware of the linguistic profile and background of their students. In addition, we propose EL portfolios as an alternative measure for LTELs to demonstrate proficiency in English (Winke & Zhang, 2019). EL portfolios would include standards-based classroom assessments, which may tap into the same constructs as state-wide standardized tests of English proficiency. The current classification of EL and LTEL is not appropriate considering that ELs who were born in the United States received English-only instruction, and at the secondary level have been identified as LTEL because they have not been reclassified as FEL. This reveals how standardized assessments represent a gatekeeping tool which serves as the white listening/reading subject that continues to position Latinx ELs and LTELs as linguistically and academically deficient.

5 | THE AUTHORS

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