

***Assessing English Language Learners: Bridges to Educational Equity: Connecting Academic Language Proficiency to Student Achievement***

Margo Gottlieb. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2016. Pp. xxi + 268.

*Assessing English Language Learners: Bridges to Educational Equity: Connecting Academic Language Proficiency to Student Achievement* is a comprehensive resource that intends to build bridges that promote educational equity, particularly in the areas of instruction and assessment. The book consists of two parts each of which includes four chapters. Part I, entitled “Assessment as a Context for Teaching and Learning: Bridges to Equity,” focuses on the issues of equity concerning the assessment of language learners, more specifically, English Language Learners (ELLs). In the introduction to Part I, Gottlieb provides her rationale for focusing on assessment equity for ELLs, where she mentions the increasing numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U.S. schools, the different life and educational experiences of ELLs, some of whom are refugees and immigrants, the importance of promoting equal educational opportunities for all students as well as these groups of students, and so on. Gottlieb provides some facts showing the changing demographics in U.S. public schools. According to Gottlieb, while *language learners* is an umbrella term descriptive of all students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, there are also many other terms that can be associated with this population of learners, such as *linguistically and culturally diverse students*, *heritage language learners*, *English language learners*, *dual language learners*, *emergent bilinguals*, *long-term English language learners*, etc. The author lists educators and their primary instructional and assessment responsibilities for the education of language learners, which can serve as a useful guide in determining the varied expectations from different educators in regard to their contribution to comprehensive services for ELLs. Gottlieb describes linguistically and culturally responsive classrooms and schools, and asserts that establishing a responsive learning environment is the only way to optimize learning opportunities and to effectively and equally serve the increasingly heterogeneous U.S. public school student population.

In chapter 1, “Assessment of Language Learners: The Bridge to Educational Equity,” Gottlieb highlights the importance of examining multiple variables that can influence the academic success of language learners, and recommends considering these factors in the instruction and assessment of language learners, particularly ELLs. When describing the identification process for ELLs, Gottlieb touches on the problematic issue of distinguishing between an English learner and an ELL with a learning disability. However, this issue is not limited only to ELLs. Another equally important issue is distinguishing between language deficiency and learning disability in general since there may be cases when English proficient students are identified as English learners because of academic challenges that can be directly related to a learning disability rather than a language deficiency, or when ELLs with learning disabilities are not identified in Special Education programs because their learning disability is dismissed as a language deficiency (Malott, & Paone, 2016; R4 Educated Solutions, 2010). In this chapter, Gottlieb also explores assessment principles for all students, defines the concepts of formative and summative assessments, and distinguishes between the two, expanding readers’ understanding regarding the purposes of assessment being *as*, *for*, and *of* learning, and finally focusing on the assessment of ELLs. The author correctly states that assessment of ELLs is a much more complex issue compared to that of native English-speaking students since the former

involves the documentation of both language proficiency and academic achievement. Gottlieb highlights the significance of academic language use in schools, and views the conscious integration of academic language into curriculum, instruction, and assessment as vital for educational equity, and consequently, for academic success of all students, including ELLs.

Chapter 2, called “Assessment of Academic Language Through Standards: The Bridge to Systemic Equity,” explores the use of academic language in standards-driven systems for language learners. The author highlights the relationship among standards, academic language use, and assessment, and asserts that academic language is the bridge connecting content standards and language development standards. Gottlieb refers to multiple sets of standards, such as College and Career Readiness Standards, Common Core State Standards, and WIDA Language Development Standards, to explain how all of these standards represent expectations for learning, shape curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and have the common goal of promoting all students’ academic success. The author places a particular emphasis on the importance of language development standards since they also reinforce academic language use, and asserts that building pathways between students’ language development and academic achievement is crucial for providing language learners with access to content and enhancing their learning opportunities.

In chapter 3, “Assessment of the Language of the Content Areas: The Bridge to Academic Equity,” the author highlights the co-existence of content and language in classrooms. The chapter addresses the language specific to the four core content areas – mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies, and explains how content-area concepts can be intertwined with language functions to promote students’ language and literacy development during instruction, and how the language of core curricular areas might be assessed. Gottlieb distinguishes between a content target and a language target, and consequently, between the assessment of academic achievement and language proficiency assessment where the former focuses more on assessing the skills and concepts associated with content, and the latter prioritizes the evaluation of language skills. The guidelines that Gottlieb provides in this chapter on how to integrate content and language within curriculum, instruction, and assessment are especially useful. The chapter further introduces assessment ideas related to the four key uses of academic language – discuss, explain, argue, and recount – across the four core curricular areas.

Chapter 4, “Assessment of Oral Language and Literacy Development: The Bridge to Linguistic Equity,” examines how students’ language and literacy development can be enhanced within and across the language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, using various performance activities, tasks, and projects. The chapter highlights the importance of reinforcing students’ home language either through informal peer interaction or formal classroom instruction for their oral language development. Research supports this claim by showing that increased fluency in students’ home language assists their second language development (Ferlazzo, & Hull-Sypniewski, 2016). Gottlieb also asserts that assessment should connect oral language to literacy and reflect instructional practices, and offers some performance activities for instructional assessment of the language modalities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, including the key uses of academic language, and multiliteracies that combine different forms of literacies to promote language learners’ meaning making and communication through multimodalities. The chapter also addresses the issue of crosslinguistic transfer or

translanguaging, which is broadly defined as “transferring or crossing meaning across languages” (Rao, Wang, & Bender, 2016, p. 210), or the influence of a language on one’s learning or use of another language, to underscore the importance of promoting language learners’ home language development along with their target language and literacy development to maximize the communicative potential of their simultaneous use of two, or sometimes even more, linguistic systems.

Part II of the book, “Assessment from a Different Perspective: The Bridge to Schoolwide Equity,” offers an assessment model *as, for, and of* learning that involves all stakeholders – students, teachers, and administrators as the primary decision makers. Chapter 5, “Assessment *as* Learning: The Bridge to Student Equity,” recognizes the crucial role of language learners in contributing to and shaping the assessment process through advocating on behalf of themselves, taking responsibility for their own learning, working towards becoming independent and self-regulated learners, reflecting on their academic and linguistic accomplishments, monitoring their personal growth and progress towards their learning goals, engaging in peer assessment, and gradually becoming instructional resources for one another, all of which ultimately allows students to develop metacognitive, metalinguistic, and metacultural awareness. In this chapter, Gottlieb also highlights the role of teachers in assessment *as* learning since it is their individual practices that shape students’ thoughts and actions, facilitating students to become independent and successful learners.

Chapter 6, entitled “Assessment *for* Learning: The Bridge to Teacher Equity,” focuses on teachers as one of the key decision makers in the assessment process. Teachers are expected to use assessments, more specifically, formative assessments, to guide their planning and instruction, which forms the basis of assessment *for* learning. Formative assessment provides meaningful data and continuous feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning, which results in improved teacher instructional practices and student performance. According to Gottlieb, assessment *for* learning as a teacher-directed process includes five steps: 1) creating standards-referenced learning targets or objectives and criteria for success, 2) matching performance assessment to learning targets or objectives and criteria for success, 3) collecting and interpreting evidence of student learning during instruction, 4) providing criterion-referenced feedback based on the evidence, and 5) making instructional decisions that advance student learning. All of these steps requires regularly referring to students’ experiences and expertise to determine if the measured set of expectations are met, or if or when any instructional adjustments are necessary. Gottlieb expands the notion of assessment *for* learning to include common instructional products and common assessments, such as cross-curricular activities, projects, thematic units, rubrics, and assessments developed by a collaborative team of teachers. Unlike formative assessment processes occurring at the micro level, common instructional products and common assessments function at the macro level and represent assessment across classrooms. The chapter provides several checklists, examples, rubrics, and resources to clearly explain the multifaceted nature of assessment *for* learning.

In chapter 7, “Assessment *of* Learning: The Bridge to Administrator Equity,” Gottlieb addresses some validity issues and inadequacies concerning high-stakes tests, and their impact on the academic status of schools and districts since the results of these standardized tests directly contribute to the accountability process for districts and states. As an advocate for

equity, Gottlieb lists both the advantages and disadvantages of using standardized achievement tests, and asserts that standardized tests are sometimes linguistically inappropriate for ELLs and ELLs with disabilities since these tests often contain complex linguistic structures that may impede ELLs' understanding of content. The research literature also supports Gottlieb's assertion, stating that the linguistic complexity of standardized tests and the lack of sufficient accommodations result in lower performance by ELLs on these tests when compared to that of their native English-speaking peers, thus raising some questions about the validity of these test results for high-stakes decision making (Menken, 2008; Quiocho, & Ulanoff, 2009). However, recent shifts in testing have had a positive impact on this issue as the new generation of achievement tests already includes a set of accessibility features and accommodations developed to mitigate the effects of language on understanding the content during standardized testing.

The last chapter, "Assessment Results: Feedback, Standards-Referenced Grading, and Reporting: The Bridge to Sustained Educational Equity," looks at grading, feedback, and reporting in a standards-referenced system, considering the assessment model *as, for, and of* learning. In a standards-referenced system, instruction and assessment are guided by a set of standards, such as content standards, language proficiency/development standards, performance standards, etc. Gottlieb discusses how standards-referenced feedback, grading, and reporting should be designed to reflect students' accomplishments, not their failings, which grades sadly often emphasize, leaving lasting negative and punitive effects on students. Gottlieb particularly highlights the challenges concerning the grading of English learners, and recommends using clear grading criteria and multiple data sources with differentiated weighting based on students' English language proficiency levels. The chapter also underscores the importance of good feedback and the significance of communicating it to students, and suggests using student assessment portfolios that can be referred to and discussed with students in teacher-student conferences. Such portfolios are believed to strengthen individualized instruction, and thus student achievement.

*Assessing English Language Learners: Bridges to Educational Equity: Connecting Academic Language Proficiency to Student Achievement* contributes to the educational research literature as a valuable resource for anyone who is involved in assessment in general, and assessment of ELLs in particular. The potential audience for this volume includes, but is not limited to, English learners, their families, preservice and in-service teacher educators, administrators, TESOL professionals and students, developers of content and English language proficiency standards, and test developers. It is clearly written and accessible to a wide range of readers as it includes an extensive and useful glossary for the terms used throughout the book and that are related to assessment and instruction in general. Throughout the book, Gottlieb puts forward important issues concerning the assessment of ELLs, and provides guidance and resources to address these issues. Each chapter includes multiple school-based scenarios, tables, surveys, checklists, rubrics, templates, and reflection questions to promote discussion and collaboration among educators and professional learning teams on the issues associated with instruction and assessment of language learners, and to facilitate the use of these ideas. Even though Gottlieb provides many useful assessment ideas, and guidance on how to design equitable and effective assessments for ELLs, the suggested ideas are rarely and insufficiently demonstrated in the form of assessment samples. Readers who are involved in the assessment of ELLs would benefit from the volume more if some assessment samples, such as those

demonstrating team-developed cross-curricular or common instructional assessments, common language assessments, the assessment of the language of core content areas, oral language, and writing, were provided in the book.

To sum up, the book fills a much-needed gap in the literature by introducing and discussing the issues concerning the assessment of ELLs from different perspectives – that of students, teachers, and administrators, offering practical guidance in regards to these issues, and providing all stakeholders with the ideas and tools needed to reach and cross the bridges leading to educational equity and success for all students.

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