

Assessment Accommodations for English Language Learners using the Student Language Assessment Plan

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the assessment accommodation process for English Language Learners (ELLs) on high-stakes testing (HST). It is understood the accommodation process is a challenge for school staff members that administer assessments to ELLs. This study addressed the problem of accountability and identification systems for ELLs by: (a) investigating the assessment accommodation process used by the study school; (b) understanding the perceptions of educators regarding the assessment accommodation process, and; (c) exploring the assessment accommodation tool used by educators to document appropriate accommodations for ELLs.

Introduction

Public schools are attempting to integrate a growing number of immigrant English language learners (ELLs) into the U.S. education system, while at the same time expecting to fulfill all mandates initiated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. According to initial NCLB mandates, students were required to achieve 100% proficiency on reading and mathematics assessments by 2014, although, a large percentage of ELLs had not acquired sufficient language proficiency to perform successfully. Today, schools continue to deal with an increasing population of ELLs, finding appropriate assessment accommodations is becoming more critical.

Literature Review

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), there were 1,622 ELLs ages 5 years and older, representing an increase of 7.0% in 2000 to 11.4% for this Mid-West town. More specifically, the data for the Mid-West school district showed a disproportionately high Hispanic population (29.15%) compared with the state Hispanic population percentage of 15.82%. Both of these data results show an increase in the Hispanic population for the town and the school district. The KSDE Report Card (2011) reported that the elementary study school had a Hispanic student population of 89.14% and an ELL population of 83.33%. The Hispanic population in the school for this study is triple the Hispanic student percentage for the school district and even greater in comparison with the state Hispanic student percentage.

Demographic changes for schools have followed a pattern of an increased ELL presence (August, Escamilla, & Shanahan, 2009; Echevarria, et al., 2011; Friend, McCrary, & Most, 2010). About 50% of the 10 million school age children in the United States speak another language; these students are classified as ELLs (Albers, Boals, & Kenyon, 2009; Albus & Thurlow, 2008; Echevarria, et al., 2011; Navarez-La Torre, 2010). The increase in ELL numbers has created another concern for schools, as they strive for academic success (Butler & Stevens, 2001; Freedson-Gonzalez, Lucas, & Villegas, 2008). Even though the ELL student numbers are growing, the ELL academic achievements of those students are dropping behind the native English speakers (Balan, Manko, & Phillips, 2011; Darcy, Manner, & Rodriguez, 2010; Echevarria, et al., 2011). According to Perie, Grigg, & Donahue (2005), only 30 percent of ELLs read proficiently and 4 percent of eighth graders scored proficient on National Assessment for Educational Progress. Low scoring results such as these, direct the attention of educators to focus on assessment accommodations for ELLs.

Gabillion (2012) studied teachers of ELLs for influences of learning. The study found discrepancies between teacher and learner understandings related to language learning. Misunderstanding the process of second language acquisition may influence the learning for ELLs. Therefore, an investigation of the perceptions teacher educators have regarding second language acquisition may be vital for ELLs to have success.

For ELLs to achieve academic success, they must have the language ability to understand the curriculum and read academic texts (Balan, Manko, & Phillips, 2011; Echevarria, Powers, & Short, 2008; Freedson-Gonzalez, Lucas, & Villegas, 2008). Successful mastery of a second language becomes the pathway for achievement (Gabillion, 2012; Houser, Lefly, & Scheffel, 2012). The

elementary school years are considered optimal for second language learning since that ability declines after the age of 15 (Bialystok, Hakuta, & Wiley, 2003; Guerrero, 2004).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the assessment accommodation process to ascertain whether test accommodations aid in providing an even playing field for ELL students or not. Not all accommodations are appropriate for ELLs, therefore, educators need to have a clear understanding of support provided by the accommodations and whether the ELL would benefit from the accommodation. Francis, et al. (2009) suggested that blanket accommodations determined solely by the label of “ELL” may be ineffective.

This creates a problem at both the state and local levels. On the state level, state policymakers need a clear understanding of the accommodations for ELLs on high-stakes testing (HST) so they will understand how accommodations are used to assist ELLs with language on assessments (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004).

Furthermore, Francis, et al. (2009) suggest, the new language requirements for testing may negatively influence the performance of ELLs unless schools participating in large-scale assessments provide appropriately designed assessment accommodations for ELLs. Therefore, language accommodations may only be effective for a select number of students.

Methodology

This qualitative case study focused on the assessment accommodations and the process for selecting accommodations for ELLs at a Mid-West elementary school. The Student Language Assessment Plan (SLAP) is a document used by staff, teachers, and administrators to develop an assessment plan for ELLs based on their language level and the language support required on assessments. The school under study provided ELLs with accommodations on assessments recorded within the SLAP. This research project investigated the SLAP through observations, interviews, and document analysis.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed by this qualitative case study related to the assessment accommodation process for ELLs regarding the SLAP. The first research question asked, ‘what process is used for the development of the SLAP for ELLs on high-stakes assessments?’ The second research question was, ‘what

are the staff, teacher, and administrator perceptions of the Student Language Assessment Plan and its implementation?’ The research questions guided the investigation into the process used to develop the SLAP documents.

Participants

There were 10 staff members in each of the four grade levels three through six who made up the 40 staff members invited to be interviewed for Phase II of the study. Since those staff members were involved with the assessments and in the classrooms with the ELLs, they were the most informed and engaged in the SLAP process, therefore, were the best choice for giving their perspectives regarding the study. Six staff members from third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade participated in the study.

Research Phases

Phase I

The data collected from observations in Phase I included the following elements: environment and process of the meetings, participants and their interactions, data and documents used and any other details that related to the SLAP development. The first week’s observation period included a 40-minute meeting for each of the grade levels that were being assessed (grades three through six). One meeting for each of the four grade levels was attended, making a total of four meetings.

Phase II

The data collected in Phase II came from the interviews. According to Hatch (2002), interviews encourage participants to share their perspectives on issues. They permit the researcher to evaluate the data for language and clues that showed the participant feelings, which, in turn, made the interview more informative. Because open-ended questions were used in this study, the duration of each of the 40 interviews was determined by the interviewees and the time required to answer the questions. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes.

Phase III

The data involved in Phase III were the assessment files for each of the ELLs. The assessment data records were reviewed for processes, as well as common and contrasting categories and themes. They were also searched for student language assessment plans, and input from staff and teachers. An

implementation of the assessment plan for the ELLs required using the SLAP as the documentation tool.

Results

Research findings from RQ1, “What process is used for the development of the SLAP for ELLs on high-stakes assessments?” Findings identified the ELL lack of success on assessments possibly because subjective informal assessment measures used in the SLAP process. Data showed the use of opinion based informal assessment measures for SLAP development. Participants based their decisions on how well ELLs were engaged in teamwork with peers, if a student could begin using the directions from a worksheet, and if the ELLs had unwanted behaviors.

The second pattern from the research findings related to RQ2, “What do the teacher, support staff, and administrator think about the SLAP and its implementation?” There were distraught perceptions felt by support staff and teachers regarding their exclusion from the SLAP process. This theme related to the pattern of negative perceptions of SLAP development by support staff and teachers not included in the process. The pattern grew from perceptions such as; partial involvement of support staff and teachers, feelings of frustration, feeling hectic and distracted, lack of formal procedure, and being told what to do.

Patterns of positive perceptions felt by support staff and classroom teachers regarding the SLAP ranged from participating in the solutions (intervention) team, involvement in the SLAP review, and overall positive perceptions of the SLAP. Some of the participants were positive about the SLAP process. The patterns revealed from the data also reflected relationships among the participants.

Conclusion

The lack of ELL success on high-stakes assessments prompted an investigation into the assessment accommodation process for ELLs. Phase I, Phase II, and Phase III of the investigation included triangulation of the data through; observations, interviews, and document analysis. The findings showed the ELL lack of success on assessments possibly because subjective informal assessment measures used in the SLAP process and the distraught perceptions felt by support staff and teachers regarding their exclusion from the SLAP Process. Francis et al. (2009) suggested the need for future research on the

accommodation process and the effectiveness of accommodations for ELLs at different language levels. Upon completion of this study, it is believed there is a need for future research regarding the accommodation process.

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