



*Classifying California's English Learners: Is the CELDT too Blunt an Instrument?*¹

Issues and Questions about the Research and Conclusions

October 26, 2011

This is a response to the report by García Bedolla and Rodriguez, published online 9-13-11.

Background and Concerns:

The report argues that there is strong evidence that California school districts are misidentifying large numbers of entering kindergarten students as English learners and calls into question the validity of the home language survey and the CELDT as the tools for identifying English Learners (ELs) in California.

The report is based on survey data where the authors garnered comments from school district personnel regarding EL identification practices. The authors do not present their survey instrument, and do not disclose data on characteristics of the universe of 134 districts or on those 37 districts (24 percent) who responded to the survey. We have no way of identifying the extent to which respondent districts are representative of the universe. We have no way of determining the qualifications of the individuals who responded to the survey, nor is there a way to judge the accuracy of their responses. The authors do not indicate that the survey went through a pilot or validation.

The report contains speculation and a number of assertions regarding the validity and reliability of California's system of identification of ELs. However, the authors present no data to support these.

Issues and Commentary:

1. The proportion of all students administered the CELDT is larger than the proportion of ELs in the total population in the district.

Comment

The authors present this as a problem. It may be, but they fail to justify why we should be concerned. The proportion of ELs in a district (ELs as a percentage of Total Enrollment) is impacted by attrition and accretion at various grades -- due to new arrivals and to reclassification and student transfers in or out (to other districts or by dropping out of school). It would be rare to see the kindergarten proportions mirroring the EL proportion overall, especially in K-12 districts. The proportion of CELDT-takers to total enrollment is not a symptom or a problem, and could vary substantially from district to district.

2. It is a problem that fewer than 10 percent of all ELs at kindergarten who are administered the CELDT score “proficient”. This was found to vary across districts.

Comment

In 2009-10 10% of initial CELDT-takers in kindergarten scored levels 4 or 5 (11% in 2008-09, and 9% in the previous two years). Rather than evidence of mis-classification, this could be a sign that the HLS, together with the CELDT provide a valid means of identifying ELs. The only way to determine mis-identification is to have some independent means of assessing a sample of those found to be EL and those found to be IFEP.

The 10 percent result may well be due to a valid and economical HLS-plus-CELDT identification process. It may be that the HLS correctly identifies those who have a significant language other than English, and that CELDT cut-scores correctly identify those students who are EL. No evidence is provided by the authors to substantiate their assertion that there are large numbers of students over-identified as EL. There is some evidence to the contrary. Initial ID with CELDT at first grade (2006-07 through 2009-10) shows that 28-36% of those tested initially at first grade scored "proficient". It is likely that these somewhat older students have had more exposure to English than their younger counterparts, may have gone to preschool prior to enrolling in public first grade classes, (or kindergarten in other states), have matured, and therefore have the true English proficiency to allow them to score in the proficient range. Similar -- and higher -- proportions show up for subsequent grades.

The authors present no evidence that the 90 percent (plus) EL classification in kindergarten is wrong or that there are mis-classifications; they seem to have hunches that this is a problem, but present no data to support their suspicions.

3. HLS may lead to testing a student who is English-dominant.

Comment

Of course, we can imagine such a case (HLS may lead to testing a student who is English-dominant). But – for example, in the case of un-balanced, subtractive bilinguals -- this child may still be EL, and needs to be assessed for English proficiency.

4. The probability for parent confusion is high (in answering the HLS).

Comment

There is only an assertion about this; the authors present no data.

5. Both the HLS and the CELDT (content and administration) are seriously flawed.

Comment

The authors assert that they are flawed, but present only circumstantial “evidence” (larger than expected proportions tested with CELDT, 90 percent of CELDT-takers getting EL scores).

They rely on Bailey and Kelly at UCLA (2010)², who described possible problems with home language surveys in various states, and propose validation studies, but the UCLA study did not provide any data on over- or under-identification, merely posited the position that such might occur.

If there is a problem with kindergarten CELDT testing, it should be demonstrated by empirical evidence from a concurrent validity study with samples of students who score EL, and those who score IFEP. Bailey and Kelly call for such studies. CDE and its contractors have done technical studies on CELDT. The authors do not cite these.

Summary

This is a seriously flawed study. Any assessment must take into account possible threats to validity and reliability, and it must be constructed in a way that is cost-effective. California's system covers over 6 million students annually. It may need refinements. It certainly could be improved by re-activating the CDE annual training and monitoring of EL requirements that were jettisoned in 2009, and by providing additional guidance to districts on how to ensure the most consistent results from the Annual Language Census. But this report does not help shed light on the solutions.

¹ García Bedolla, Lisa, University of California, Berkeley; Rodriguez, Rosaisela, University of California, Berkeley. Published online 9-13-2011 @ <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2m74v93d>

² Bailey and Kelly, 2010. *The use and validity of home language surveys in state English language proficiency assessment systems*. LA: UCLA Center for Assessment