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**Assessing students content knowledge and language  
proficiency**

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## **Introduction**

The relationship between language proficiency and content knowledge in assessment is complex. Language is often seen as a source of irrelevant variance in content assessment, while content knowledge is viewed as a potential source of irrelevant variance in language assessment. Language and content knowledge are traditionally considered separate constructs in assessment.

Assessments cannot separate language proficiency and content knowledge. Language assessments include content; content assessments involve language. Link between content and language is significant in assessing second language learners.

The connection between language proficiency and content knowledge is essential due to the rise of bilingual education and content-based instruction in the 1990s. With increased immigration and globalization, a significant number of students are learning content in a second language. English language learners in the USA make up almost 10% of school-aged children. The popularity of English-medium universities and CLIL programs in Europe further underscores the importance of language and content integration.

Assessment programs lack integration of language and content. Education in non-native language doesn't affect assessment processes. This chapter explores research on the relationship between language and content in assessment.

### **Early developments**

- Content-based instruction transformed language teaching by emphasizing content as a context for learning rather than general communication

- Concerns over the relationship between content and language arose in bilingual education programs

- Short advocates for involving English learners in regular curricula despite language proficiency levels to ensure academic success

- She supports alternative assessments like skill checklists and portfolios over standardized tests for integrated language and content courses

- Short recommends focusing on either content or language specifically during assessment, rather than combining the two

### **Major contributions**

Major contributions to our understanding of the relationship between language proficiency and content knowledge in assessment emerged from the following areas of research: (1) language for specific purposes (LSP) testing and (2) content and language assessment of ELLs in schools

#### **Language for specific purpose testing**

The relationship between content and language in Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) testing is complex. While Davies emphasized testing language manipulation abilities, Douglas highlighted the inclusion of nonlinguistic elements in LSP assessment. Background knowledge is considered through indigenous assessment criteria, derived from the target language domain, to measure the construct effectively.

Elder et al. (2012) conducted a study on health professionals' judgments of communication skills in a specific-purpose English language test. They found that professionals focused more on clinical aspects rather than language skills in their feedback. The authors suggest reasons for this, such as prioritizing clinical matters or viewing language skills as irrelevant. Understanding why professionals neglected language skills is crucial for comprehending the role of content and language in the context.

Emery (2014) discusses the integration of language and subject matter knowledge in aviation English over the past 30 years. He emphasizes the challenge of balancing these aspects in LSP testing, highlighting the issue of validity of test scores. In the context of aviation English, where professionals possess high expertise, separating subject matter and language knowledge may be less critical.

## **Content and language assessment of ELLs in schools**

- Global rise in student assessments, including English Language Learners (ELLs), due to increased testing and accountability

- No Child Left Behind in the USA requires annual assessments of ELLs in English, math, and science, raising concerns about accurate evaluation of their knowledge and language skills

- Importance of content-language connection emphasized

Content language link in content assessment

- Assessing ELLs in content areas includes challenges related to score interpretation

- Abide (2004) argues that language can impact assessments, making scores less meaningful indicators of content knowledge

- Accommodations aim to separate language and content constructs to allow students to demonstrate mastery effectively

- Research on accommodations to reduce linguistic load in tests has had mixed results, prompting a need to better understand the language-content link

- Avenia-Tapper and Llosa propose using systemic functional linguistics to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant language in assessments

- They argue that complex linguistic features are vital for content area mastery

-By considering the presence or absence of these features in the domain of the test, developers can prevent construct underrepresentation in accommodated tests, which could negatively affect English language learners

## **Content language link in English language proficiency ELP assessment**

Research found that English language proficiency tests prior to NCLB did not align with academic language needed by students. Work was done to define academic language proficiency for K-12 ELLs, focusing on lexical, grammatical, and textual characteristics.

-The 2004 ELP standards signaled a significant shift in thinking about academic English proficiency, deviating from previous standards that focused on language as communication aligned with English language arts

-Developed by the WIDA consortium and adopted by TESOL, these standards connected ELP to social and instructional language as well as language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies

-The ACCESS for ELLs assessment, measuring mastery of these standards, also evaluates content knowledge, revealing domain-general and domain-specific linguistic factors influencing performance.

-In most test forms, the general factor was stronger, but in forms testing higher English proficiency levels, the domain-specific factor was stronger

-This makes it challenging to separate language from content knowledge

## **Work in progress**

Ongoing work in K-12 assessment in the USA is aimed at redefining the relationship between language proficiency and content knowledge. New standards such as Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards emphasize literacy and language-rich practices, focusing on skills like constructing arguments and evaluating evidence.

-The ELP standards have shifted towards focusing on language in content areas

-New standards require innovative approaches to support ELLs in meeting requirements

-Understanding Language Initiative emphasizes language as crucial in academic learning

-Recommendations include shifting to language-in-use environments and providing appropriate contexts for language development

-Science education for ELLs should focus on language skills needed for NGSS practices

-Consortia are developing ELP assessments aligned to new standards

Two consortia developing ELP assessments align with new standards. WIDA revised ACCESS for ELLs with explicit academic language features.

## **Problems and difficulties**

-The lack of empirical research on the relationship between content knowledge and language proficiency is a major challenge in education

-It is important to understand how content and language abilities develop simultaneously in language learning

-This lack of research makes it difficult to establish boundaries between language proficiency and content knowledge, especially in K-12 assessment

-Identifying these boundaries is crucial for assessing students' difficulties and providing diagnostic information for educators

-It is essential to differentiate between language proficiency and content knowledge in order to effectively assess and support student learning