Getting Language Right

Standards, Assessments, and ELL-Categorized Students

Guadalupe Valdés
Stanford University
In this presentation, I am going to talk about: **Language**
In my description of this talk, I asked:

• What if the ways that we think and talk about language are wrong?

• What if our views about good and bad English actually reflect our perspectives on the racial and ethnic characteristics of the speakers?

• What if drilling new learners of English on vocabulary and grammatical structures does not help them use the language in order to learn?

• What if English language proficiency (ELP) assessments can only tell us where a student scores with reference to the hypothesized sequence of development on which the state assessment is based?
So, I will focus on students bureaucratically categorized as English language learners. I examine the challenges of what I call “getting language right” in a highly politicized context in which:

1. anti-immigrant sentiments are widely expressed,
2. the achievement gap between mainstream students and ELL students is of growing concern,
3. there are many theoretical debates about second language acquisition and development.
I will say a bit about

The ways that we **see** and **hear** language in the field of education.
I will also talk about

- Common conceptions of bilingualism
- Knee-jerk perspectives on “English language learners”
And finally, about:

The challenges surrounding current and future uses of assessments with Ell-categorized students
I will raise issues that I hope you will continue to discuss during this conference
So what is language, anyway?

a) Structure and form?
b) A semiotic system?
c) A social practice?
d) A set of rules?
e) All of the above?
In their very recent work, young scholars are pointing out that we both see and hear language.
Because they are engaged in the study of the intersections of language, race, and social class (Flores and Rosa, 2019), they point out that:

1. The bilingualism of the children of elites (e.g., Princess Charlotte) is seen differently than that of minoritized students from racialized backgrounds.

2. Low-income bilingual students from racialized backgrounds are framed as “English learners” (ELs) who pose a challenge for public schools.
The word “bilingualism” is a popular term that has been made to cover so many different phenomena that it has become virtually meaningless. Haugen (1970, p.222)
In the popular mind:

**Bilinguals** are:

two educated monolingual native speakers in one person

persons who:

◦ have perfect control of two language systems
◦ can pass undetected among monolinguals of each of their languages
◦ can translate easily between their two languages
◦ can carry out the same functions identically in each of their languages
In educational discourse, the terms we use reflect a number of these same perspectives.

- Real bilinguals
- True bilinguals
- Balanced bilinguals
- Unbalanced bilinguals
- Flawed bilinguals
Over more than four decades, however, the scholarship on bilingualism has established that:

Bilinguals are specific speaker-hearers (Grosjean, 1985, 1989).
Bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one.
Bilinguals use their multiple linguistic repertories in a variety of ways in order to meet their communicative needs.
Bilinguals do not normally have the same levels of proficiency in all language modalities (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in each of their languages,
Bilinguals should be compared only to other bilinguals and not to monolinguals in any one of their languages.
May (2014) has referred to these changes in perspective as:

the “multilingual turn” in applied linguistics

a natural consequence of the increasingly globalized world in which the acquisition of many languages is taking place

a rejection of the tendency to view individuals acquiring a second language as failed native speakers
New discourses on bilingualism include notions such as:

Multicompetence
Translanguaging
Codemeshing
Metrolingualism
Transidiomatic practices
Plurilingualism
Superdiversity
HOW AND WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS IN SCHOOLS
In the field of education, the discourse on the language differences has been characterized by a series of oppositions including:

- Standard versus Non-Standard English
- Correct versus Incorrect Language
- Native versus Non-native Proficiency
- Oracy versus Literacy
- Elaborated versus Restricted Code
- BICS versus CALP
- Academic Language versus various putative opposites (e.g., social language, everyday language, colloquial language)
The notion’ of “academic language” is particularly imprecise

Bailey (2011), for example, categorized 118 educators’ varying definitions of academic language under 14 different themes and included responses such as:

- Academic language is the language of school.
- Academic language is comprised of words and phrases necessary to comprehend a subject.
- Academic language is the English required to understand books.
- Academic language is the technical language of academic content disciplines.
- Academic language is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).
- Academic language is a formal language rather than a street language or what is used at home with family.
Because of its impreciseness,

It is often conceptualized as something that those students don’t have.
In the current educational context, vendors sell “evidence-based” solutions for:

- Addressing vocabulary gaps
- Teaching sentence stems
- Leveling English Language Development (ELD) classes
- Supporting the acquisition of “cash” English
- Developing phonological awareness
- Building reading fluency
- Promoting lexile growth
- Closing the achievement gap
At the same time, current scholarship focusing on language and society and language development/acquisition is engaged in:

Discussions about: the notion of language itself as it is understood in nationalist ideologies of belonging.

The rejection of monolithic and formalist conceptualizations of language.
Scholars have raised fundamental questions about:

The social construction of “named” national languages (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007)


The use of the native-speaker norm in additional language acquisition (Canagaragah, 1999; Cook, 1999; Doerr, 2009; Leung, Harris & Rampton, 1997; Piller, 2002; Rampton, 1990; Toker, 2012)

The appropriateness of monolingual norms in assessment (Extra, Spotti & van Avermaet, 2009; Rothman & Iverson, 2010; Shohamy, 2011; Solano Flores, 2006, 2008; Wei & Cruz Ferreiro, 2010)
The function and strengths of multilingual linguistic practices in which resources are used flexibly (Blommaert, 2012; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Canagarajah, 2011; O. García & Li Wei, 2013; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010; Rampton, 2011)

The assumed linearity of the second language acquisition process (de Bot, et al., 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Ortega, 2011, 2014)

The dominance of cognitivist perspectives in second language acquisition (SLA) (Larsen-Freeman, 2013)
Conceptualizations of Language matter a great deal (Seedhouse, Walsh & Jenks, 2010)

“Teaching” language requires) that we agree on:
- What it is that has to be learned/taught given that definition of language.
- What it is that needs to be taught given different learner characteristics and goals.
- What we know (and don’t know) about how those aspects of language are learned.
- What we know about how teachable these aspects of language are in a classroom context?
For example, is language:

- a set of building blocks (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and meaning) acquired one block at a time in language classes?

- ways of speaking and writing that can be classified as correct or incorrect, standard or non-standard, native and non-native?

- a communicative repertoire (Rhymes, 2011) acquired in actual use which includes a number of styles and registers of one or more language(s) (e.g., colloquial, presentational, intimate, casual, and more literate-like varieties of language)?
These conceptualizations:

Are clearly different
Give rise to dramatically different assumptions about both “teaching” and “learning: languages.
Have contributed to existing debates in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) because researchers may not be aware that they are starting with vastly different conceptualizations of language.
As I have already pointed out, ideologies of language matter as well. Unexamined ideas and beliefs that shape people’s thinking about language and about those who use language—often multiple and conflicting—include “notions of what is ‘true,’ ‘morally good,’ or ‘aesthetically pleasing’ about language, including who speaks and does not speak “correctly.”
The population of children for whom schools must be accountable under the ELL category includes

US born children

American Indian and Alaska Native

Immigrant students of
  ◦ Hispanic,
  ◦ Asian,
  ◦ European,
  ◦ Pacific Islander,
  ◦ Caribbean, and African origin
The population also includes:

- Students with disabilities
- Undocumented students
- Homeless children
- Transnational youth
- Refugee children
- Unaccompanied minors
For these students, assessment is required for the following accountability purposes:

- Identification to determine if students are “English learners” and are qualified for services
- Annual monitoring of progress in English language proficiency
- Annual monitoring of academic achievement
Under NCLB: States were required:

(1) to establish or adopt **English language proficiency (ELP) standards** for all students identified as non-English-background students,

(2) to develop or adopt an **English language proficiency assessment aligned with the state’s ELP standards**, and

(3) to **establish criteria** that would identify when students have met the required level of English proficiency for reclassification as English proficient.
Recent reports
Importantly, all of these reports refer to:

- The demographic diversity of the population
- The variability of ELL definitions across datasets
- The disparities between methods used to initially identify ELLs
- The quality and comparability of ELP assessment tests
Under ESSA:

States are required to develop standardized entry and exit procedures for determining whether a student is an EL that are consistent across districts within the state.

It is required that ELL-categorized students be included in state assessment systems (typically available only in English) after a period of one year of schooling in English—which makes it difficult to validly assess any second language learner in the second language.
ESSA language also includes the following statement:

English Learners shall be assessed ... in a valid and reliable manner and provided

- appropriate accommodations on assessments administered to such students
- including, to the extent practicable, assessments in the language and form most likely to yield accurate data on what such students know and can do in academic content areas, until such students have achieved English language proficiency”
Large-scale assessments present special challenges to Ell-categorized students

There is a growing body of work that has expressed concern about the validity and reliability of academic achievement measures for ELLs and the capacity of assessment systems to properly test those students (Abedi & Gandara, 2006; Abedi & Linquanti, 2012; Duran, 1989, 2008; Kopriva, 2008; Solano-Flores, 2006, 2008; 2009; Solano-Flores & Li, 2009; Solano-Flores & Turnbull, 2003, 2008) and Young, 2009).
This work focuses on various issues, for example:

- The difficulty of obtaining dependable measures of academic achievement for students who have limited proficiency in the language in which they are tested.
- Lack of effective approaches to minimize language proficiency as a factor that negatively affects the performance of these students on tests.
- The extent to which appropriate generalizations can be made about ELL-categorized students’ academic achievement based on test scores.
The assessment of language itself is also a challenge

Under ESSA, mandated ELP assessments must measure students’ proficiency in the areas of speaking, listening, reading, and writing appropriate to their age and grade level.

A measure of students’ ability to comprehend English was also added as a requirement, with the possibility that this measure could be derived based on students’ oral comprehension and reading scores.
The 2017 report takes note of the challenges of assessing language but is optimistic:

While construction and validation of a comprehensive theory of English Language Proficiency germane to the use of English for academic learning purposes and relevant ELP assessment is not yet at hand, important progress is being made.
Simultaneously, there are growing concerns in the field of language testing. McNamara (2011), for example, points out that: Policy initiatives expressed in the wording of standards are increasingly central to language testing. The fact the standards set by policy act as the basis for the test has changed the nature of language testing.
McNamara points out that:

Previously, test developers, informed by the latest theories of language proficiency, of communicative interaction, and of the way in which language knowledge intersects with and interacts with other aspects of professional or educational competence, themselves defined the test construct before developing a procedure which would provide evidence relevant to it.
This 'thinking stage' of test development has now been removed.

Instead, given that the test construct, and its wording, are determined by complex policy procedures, the relevance of evolving discussions within applied linguistics on the nature of language proficiency and communicative interaction is far less likely to be used to inform test constructs.
ELP Standards

Describe an order and sequence of English language development so that ELP assessments can then evaluate how well students have learned (or acquired) specific elements, functions, skills or other aspects of language described in the Standards.

Assessment is essential for compliance with existing legal mandates.
Testing language

Testing language is a complicated and difficult endeavor.

There is much concern about the what is tested, how it is tested, and what the impact of these tests are on individuals (Shohamy, 2001; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Davies, 2012; Walters, 2012; Hudson, 2012; and Spolsky, 2012).

The practice of language testing “makes an assumption that knowledge, skills and abilities are stable and can be ‘measured’ or ‘assessed.’ It does it in full knowledge that there is error and uncertainty, and wishes to make the extent of the error and uncertainty transparent” (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007, p.2).
On the one hand, each language assessment asserts, at least implicitly, a certain conceptualization of language and of language acquisition by stipulating a normative sequence in which people are expected to gain language proficiency with respect to the content and methods of the test.

On the other hand, there is no universally agreed upon theory of language or of language acquisition nor any systematic means of accounting for the great variation in which people need, use, and acquire oral and literate language abilities (My emphasis).
Cumming further adds that:

This approach involves a logical circularity because what learners are expected to learn is defined by the standards, taught or studied in curriculum and then assessed “in reference to the standards, as a kind of achievement testing.”

He cautions that the applications of such assessments:

“should not be misinterpreted as evaluations of proficiency or competency generally or by extension to contexts other than the curriculum standards or local educational conditions.”
Many applied linguists would argue that:

ELP assessments can tell us very little about students’ proficiency or competency in English broadly conceived. They can only tell us where a student scores with reference to the hypothesized sequence of development on which the state assessment is based.

Given current federal and state regulations, they allow educators to classify and categorize students and, in theory, to provide them with appropriate instructional supports while they acquire English.

Many would argue that in a world of imperfect systems, states are doing the very best they can.
But scholars such as Byalstok & Peets (2011, p. 134) warn us that:

Our ordinary conversational means for describing people’s language experience perpetuates a fiction so compelling that we accept the description as a meaningful category. We talk as though being bilingual, or being a language learner, or being literate in a language is an identifiable state with objective criteria and stable characteristics.
Our faith in these descriptions as reliable and valid categories extends to education, where such categories are used to classify children and place them in various instructional programs, and to research, where experimental designs are build around the objective of uncovering the unique profile for members of the respective categorical groups.
Practically, these approaches are useful and allow educational practice and research inquiry to proceed, producing outcomes that are largely positive. Theoretically, however, the categories are elusive, with individual variation within a category sometimes as great as that between two individuals in different categories (Bialystok & Peets, 2011, p. 134).
In order to achieve both equity and opportunity for all students all of us, officials, administrators, researchers and educators, must attack our education failings as a moral and economic imperative.

In the case of English language learners, it is also essential that we *get language right*. 
The challenges surrounding the assessment of ELL-categorized students are many. The quality and comparability of ELP assessment tests will continue to matter. Many applied linguists would argue that shifting knowledge and perspectives on language must also matter in the assessment of vulnerable children.
As Solano-Flores, an assessment expert, pointed out (2009):

Minimizing population misspecification, measurement error, and over-generalization are all equally critical to designing assessment systems (or improving existing ones) in ways that produce accurate measures of academic achievement and sound testing practices for ELLs.
Unfortunately

Even if you agree that what we are doing is not quite right

There is no clear road ahead.

But we can begin to think just a bit differently.
Language instruction requires the categorization of learners

*English language learners (ELLs)*
*AAVE speakers*
*Non-standard English speakers*
*Heritage language learners*
*Long-term-English-learners*

The social construction of language-learner categories, while they may appear to be neutral and common sense descriptions of student characteristics ([McDermott, 1996](#)), deeply affect the academic lives of students who are sorted and categorized in ways that seriously impact their lives ([Kibler and Valdés, 2016](#)).
The populations that we seek to describe with a single term are multidimensional and complex.
An example

ELLs are students who are *bureaucratically categorized as ELLs.*

They are not a *homogeneous group.*
Beginners
- Understand very little
- Produce memorized language, imitate & repeat
- Little or no ability to comprehend or produce written English

Still growing
- Understand almost everything said
- Communicate with some limitations
- Limitations in reading some materials
- Some difficulties expressing themselves in writing

Fluent-functional
- Understand everything said, can interpret tone including sarcasm & humor
- Express themselves effectively with some limitations
- May have limitations in reading & writing
You may notice that when we use the term English language learners, our thoughts almost immediately go to beginners. This includes students who are newly arrived and students who are entering kindergarten and first grade.
But many ELLs are English language users who:

01 Talk to each other in English
02 Text in English
03 Use subtle humor, sarcasm, irony
They are at different stages of English language development.

- Their English may be imperfect.
- Their primary language may transfer in unexpected ways.
- But they are USERS of English.
Minoritized Immigrant

Poor

Non-English-Background

Long Term English Learner

LEP

Limited bilingual

Newly Arrived

Zero English

Not Yet RFEP
Single labels are imprecise, often negative and sometimes misleading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERM</th>
<th>LIMITATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limited English Speakers</strong></td>
<td>Deficit perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language learners</td>
<td>No focus on the language already spoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilinguals</td>
<td>Euphemism for poor and uneducated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent bilinguals</td>
<td>Has “two –monolinguals-in-one-person” baggage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggests incipiency- first steps –no path for development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The challenge

Avoiding single labels
Insisting on describing the complexity the population in our writing
Insisting on being “wordy,”
Resisting the lure of shortening our descriptors (ELL, EB)
Fighting the tendency of using labels to divide us into opposing camps
There are no ideal labels

Responsible scholarship and practice, however, demands both preciseness and accuracy when we describe a population of very vulnerable students whose differences matter in important ways.
In 1980, Dwight Bolinger told us that:

Language is a loaded weapon used by shamans to shame us about how we speak and write.
Many decades later, in schools, language (however conceptualized) continues to have the potential to be used by shamans to do great harm to children.
Today I have hoped to suggest that for assessment experts, researchers, and educators, the challenges are many

1. In working with “linguistically diverse” students, we must examine both our conceptualizations and ideologies of language as well as our understandings of bilinguals and bilingualism.

2. We must and examine manifestations of racism (Luke, 2009; Mark, 2009, Rosa, 2010) and language ideologies (Leeman, 2012, Flores, 2013, Flores & Rosa, 2015) to determine how together they impact the lives of minoritized students in their journey to develop and maintain a repertoire of complex linguistic resources.

3. As both researchers and educators, we must ask new questions, disagree, rethink our own views and our own writings (both present and future) so that together we can support a strong future for minoritized speakers of all varieties of English as well as heritage, community, and Native American languages.
A commitment to making a difference:

Requires and demands our continued and sustained questioning of taken-for-granted theories and established practices.
Thank You

gvaldes@stanford.edu