
Meaningful Tests Promote Articulation

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In the wake of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act there has been much consternation among teachers about the deleterious effects of “high stakes” testing. In some states, it has been shown that the obsession with scores on reading and mathematics tests has had a detrimental impact on world language programs (Ashford, 2005; NASBE, 2005). While language teachers in some states may be relieved that they do not have to deal with the pressure and accountability that come with standardized testing, the existence of a well-defined, reliable, and valid proficiency test in New York State (NYS) has helped strengthen and validate language programs, to improve instruction (Rissell, 2005) and provide a framework for K-16 articulation.

Testing and Articulation in New York State, K-16

The New York State curriculum in Languages Other than English (LOTE) is outlined in *Modern Languages for Communication* (1986). It defines 15 topics and four language functions at three levels of proficiency called “checkpoints.” The first benchmark, Checkpoint A, is assessed with a secure, on-demand test called the Second Language Proficiency (SLP).¹ This test is administered in five languages on the same date in June across the state to students having had two years of language instruction prior to the end of grade 8. The on-demand portion tests listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing. A speaking portion with well-defined protocols is administered prior to the written portion and represents 30% of the test score. What makes the SLP different from much of the NCLB testing is that a passing score gives one high school credit and meets the NYS graduation requirement for all students. In other words, there is a real incentive for the students to perform to the best of their abilities.

After two more years of LOTE instruction, students can take the New York State Regents Exam for Level III, Checkpoint B. The Regents is a parallel assessment to the SLP. There is a speaking portion worth 24% and an on-demand paper-and-pencil test, which includes tests of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing. In addition to giving credits for earning a passing grade, there is an additional incentive. Students earning a grade of at least 85% meet the State University of New York (SUNY) system-wide LOTE minimum graduation requirement for all degree programs. In other words, you can get into a SUNY school without a LOTE, but you cannot get a degree without at least the equivalent of two semesters of LOTE study. Several of the campuses are also requiring an additional year beyond that benchmark in order to completely waive a student’s college foreign language requirement.

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These real incentives for achievement have encouraged more students to persevere in their LOTE study and to work harder to earn more than minimum passing grades. It has been interesting to observe that weaker language students, who may have dropped out of LOTE classes in previous years, and who wish to keep their college options open, are now staying and meeting the SUNY waiver requirement. When students are motivated to stay in a class that may seem difficult, they give themselves enough time to be able to “get it,” and ultimately can experience success. In addition, enrollments in level four classes have also been increasing. Once experiencing success on the Regents exam, more are choosing to continue language study in high school. Some graduates even report continuing their language study in college. However, the greatest boon of the testing program has been to facilitate articulation at all levels of LOTE instruction.

At times, attempts at even the most basic articulation among teachers of different levels can quickly focus more on differences in approach rather than on any sense of shared purpose. Clearly defined content with meaningful assessments help set aside the finger-pointing in order to focus on the achievement of the students. Middle school teachers who give the SLP are accountable to teach the curriculum because their students will be tested individually on their language skills. They cannot spend two weeks on craft projects or cooking! On the other hand, high school teachers cannot just teach a cavalcade of verb tenses or noun declensions because, at the end, students must speak, read authentic texts, listen, and write. The very clearly defined topics and functions in the state syllabus provide a compass and a roadmap for teachers to follow. The parallel nature of the two assessment instruments facilitates a more natural transition from one level to the next.

Having well-articulated benchmarks still allows and encourages individual departments and instructors to retain significant control over language teaching methodology and the sequence of instruction. State standards, which spiral across these levels and broadly define the content of instruction, promote a common language for making curricular decisions. The testing program helps teachers focus on increasing student language proficiency. The tests provide data on which to base modifications to the instructional program and to inform future staff development needs.

Another real strength of the New York State SLP and Regents Exams is that teachers of the tested levels are contracted to write all of the test items, which are then field-tested and assembled into an exam by the Bureau of Testing in a form that is reliable and valid. Panels of teachers scrutinize the final version of the tests before they are administered. This gives the test credibility with practitioners in the field and offers an additional check on their alignment with the published syllabus.

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The increasing popularity of Advanced Placement (AP) programs offers another example in which a meaningful, reliable, and valid testing program can promote articulation. The College Board has recognized the importance of enriching the pre-AP levels of instruction in order to help more students be successful on the AP exams, and is helping to facilitate that dialogue through its workshops. The College Board is also becoming an important agent of articulation between high school teachers at all levels and university instructors, with the issue of how to improve student achievement through secure, predictable, and reliable AP testing instruments as a common focus.

Testing and Articulation in Post-secondary Education

Content area testing for teacher candidates is also beginning to provide an impetus for the types of conversations that open the door to articulation. The calls from taxpayers and politicians for accountability, which initiated the current testing “mania” at the K-12 level, have begun to extend to the post-secondary level as well. For those

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institutions having teacher preparation programs, foreign language departments are being drawn into the dialogue through the accreditation process. In New York, foreign language teacher candidates are required to pass a Content Specialty Test (CST). In addition, more colleges are requiring them to submit to some manner of Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) testing as a requirement for the language major. These test results will provide solid data upon which departments can begin to examine both the content and methodology for continuing a more performance-based focus than may have been prevalent in the past. The beginning of this internal scrutiny among college foreign language faculty may provide encouragement for them to consider greater participation in local, state, regional, and national professional organizations for language teachers, which are, perhaps, the best vehicles we have for fostering sound K-16 articulation.

Conclusion

“Teaching to the test” can be very positive if the tests are good. Teachers of languages other than English in New York have taken advantage of standardized testing mandates, whose results are tied to granting credit and meeting advanced requirements, as a way of retaining students and defending programs in times of cutbacks and diminishing resources. The results from these tests, along with those from teacher certification tests and the findings of accreditation panels, can give an objective basis upon which to initiate meaningful articulation projects. The common goal of improved student achievement becomes the focus for the types of conversations that lead to curricular alignment and increased language proficiency for all students.

Note

1. Copies of the Second Language Proficiency Exams, Comprehensive Regents Examinations including administration instructions, scoring rubrics, graded anchor papers, and syllabus documents are downloadable from the New York State Education Department website. The only material which is not available are the secured booklets of the actual speaking tasks. You can find all these materials at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/lotte/home.html>.

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