

**An Ethnographic/
Sociolinguistic
Approach to
Language
Proficiency
Assessment**

Edited by
Charlene Rivera

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS 8

An Ethnographic/Sociolinguistic Approach To Language Proficiency Assessment

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**MULTILINGUAL
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CHARLENE RIVERA
FORMER ALPBP PROJECT DIRECTOR
INTER AMERICA RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

PREFACE

The great population shifts occurring throughout the world today are once again focusing attention on language policy in the education of children who do not speak the language of the country in which they are being schooled. The establishment of guest-worker policies in Europe and Australia and politically-motivated migrations of peoples from regions such as Southeast Asia and the Caribbean are some of the events that have brought about this situation. As Kloss observes,

"Until recently, it was possible to venture an admittedly crude generalization regarding the global issue of language maintenance vs. language shift. Africa and the Americas, so the statement went, were leaning toward language shift in order to reduce the number of tribal tongues, and in the New World, also of immigrant tongues. In Europe and Asia, on the other hand, the psychological climate was held to be more favorable to language retention. This juxtaposition is beginning to get blurred, chiefly because so many American nations are moving toward greater freedom for maintenance — as a concomitant — for the unfolding of nondominant languages." (1977, p. iii)

Although the official language of the Federal government has always been English, historically the United States has not been a strictly monolingual country in either the speech of its people or its governments. State and local polities with high concentrations of people speaking other languages, at various times, have conducted their affairs in languages other than English: Spanish in Puerto Rico, French in some parishes of Louisiana and counties of Maine, German in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and Spanish in the Southwest and New York City.

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Current Census data indicate that over 65 languages are spoken by a large number of citizens; recognition of the distinction among the Native American languages would add even more. The linguistic diversity brought on by earlier waves of immigration continues today as new waves of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Iranians enter this country (Kloss, 1977).

The cost and consequences of the different approaches being used in the United States to educate such children are, therefore, of great interest not only within this country, but also to those concerned with the social, economic and political fabric of many other countries.

Schools have used diverse instructional methods for children from families speaking languages other than English. Some have taught in English in a sink or swim fashion or with the variant of adapting the English used to the students' comprehension. Some combine special tutoring in English, English as a Second Language (ESL), with use of English as the language of the classroom. If the student seems more proficient in the native language than in English, some schools provide academic instruction in the student's first language, in addition to ESL instruction. Still others, particularly in the early grades, provide almost all instruction, including reading and writing, in the students' first language, phasing in ESL while the child becomes literate in the native language.

Decisions about instructional approaches are influenced by considerations other than that of the learner's mastery of English. For example, the numbers of language minority students, language diversity, availability of qualified teachers, costs, and attitudes toward language acquisition and maintenance are major considerations. Close to the center of these decisions, however, should be various theories concerning the nature of language proficiency essential for success in school along with an understanding of the impact of the various instructional approaches on the development of language skills and overall student achievement. Often at the core of such a discussion are beliefs about the what and the how of language proficiency assessment.

The purposes of the Assessment of the Language Proficiency of Bilingual Persons (ALPBP) project were, first, to bring together what is known about these issues and, second, to improve understanding of language proficiency assessment in ways that would be practical for classroom teachers. The result, it was hoped, would be to provide constructs for thinking about language proficiency that could lead to practical tools for teachers' use and to better informed entry/exit decisions.

Points Of Origin

There were several points of origin for the ALPBP project. One was the 1978 Falmouth Conference on Testing, Teaching and Learning (Tyler & White, 1979). This meeting came about as a result of the 1978 conference called by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW) to identify reasons for the decline in achievement test scores. Participants at the DHEW conference argued that a significant factor in the decline was the use of inappropriate tests. Using this line of reasoning the Falmouth Conference participants concluded that testing could serve important purposes if it were done in a different manner. They recognized that the use of standardized testing was often inefficient and unreliable, particularly, when used to make educational decisions about individuals and effectiveness of programs. This was found to be particularly true in light of findings from human cognition studies. Thus, the participants urged Federal support of new approaches to testing:

"How are we to pursue this vision of testing merged into a teaching-testing system, fitted to the natural classroom situation, drawing upon the cognitive scientists and teachers and scholars in the subject areas, and exploiting the rapidly developing information-handling technology? One way is to continue and perhaps expand support for research on classroom process and human cognition, and for the development of new technological-based testing, and testing involving persons from the subject area . . . development projects are often excellent sites for fundamental research." (Tyler & White, 1979, p. 2)

Another point of origin was a national survey of language minority students (O'Malley, 1982) and a project to develop entry-exit criteria for bilingual education programs (Southwest, 1980). Despite the usefulness of the results of these projects, their development was marked by some concern for the adequacy of language proficiency assessment measures. The researchers used the best of what was known in order to carry out the *Children's English and Services Study* and to develop criteria for the Student Placement System yet recognized that the time had arrived to put resources into the kind of studies that could contribute to the overall improvement of language proficiency assessment procedures, a view supported by many researchers (e.g. Cazden *et al.*, 1972; Cummins, 1979; Carrasco *et al.*, 1978; Hymes, 1976).

A third point of origin was the enthusiasm shown by many involved in

language proficiency assessment for what variously had been called interactive research, collaborative development and developmental research. The notion is that knowledge and application have for too long been separated. More effective research, it has been recognized, can be carried out if researchers and practitioners work together as co-equal members of a team. A few models of such interactive research have been carried out (e.g. Tikunoff *et al.*, 1979; Tikunoff *et al.*, 1980; Philips, 1980; Shalaway & Lamer, 1979) and their results seem promising.

Other points of origin were the thinking that went into research agenda-building for the 1978 Congressionally mandated bilingual education studies, the funding of the Center for Research on Bilingualism, and the bilingual research concerns of the National Institute of Education's Teaching and Learning program. The scores of papers, workshops, analyses, conferences and meetings leading into these activities laid some of the foundations for the project.

The issues which emerged from these activities and experiences precipitated NIE to develop an RFP which called for interactive research and which focused on issues related to language proficiency assessment. The RFP states that,

"Two of the most pressing needs in educating children from minority language backgrounds are (1) to pursue fundamental research on the nature of language proficiency and how it can be measured, and (2) to provide teachers with up-to-date knowledge of language proficiency assessment so they can improve their classroom assessment practices. The purpose of the RFP is to solicit proposals for a program of work with two parts: (1) the administration of a competitive research program to support fundamental research on language proficiency assessment and (2) the operation of an experimental program of teacher training designed to introduce teachers to current research perspectives on language proficiency assessment." (NIE, 1979, p. 5)

Arrivals

How successful has the effort been?

First, educational decisions are not likely to be better than our understanding of language acquisition, language functioning and the nature of language and its uses. While the finest crucible for promoting understanding may be a theory-based, hypothesis-testing strong inference studies, another way of assessing depth of understanding is to determine if it

can be applied. In this sense, the project has been successful.

Second, one of the functions of research is to help illuminate the way issues are thought about. It should improve ability to speak in more precise terms, and to refine the debates that go on as people seek their way toward new policies. Although a consensus on what is known about the nature of language proficiency and how it can be measured may not have been reached, the ALPBP project effort should at least clarify points of disagreement, reasons for them, and frame the issues even more constructively. Here also the results were commensurate with the considerable effort invested in the ALPBP project.

Third, there was an effort to form a working definition of communicative competence and language proficiency and to make practical recommendations which would be useful to teachers in the assessment of language minority students for the purpose of making better entry/exit decisions and for the improvement of classroom practice. Here our reach exceeded our grasp and the fundamental research. Although many definitions and descriptions are offered in the papers in this and the accompanying volumes, it was not possible to reach a consensus with regard to a working definition of communicative competence.

Determining how many children in this country are language minority, deciding which of their needs are uniquely language related, and what services may meet those needs are tasks which are likely to engage attention for some time to come. Definitions and their applications may influence estimates of resources needed, distribution of resources, and the nature of programs, as well as the fate of individual students. Hoping for clean-cut guidance on any of these issues is ambitious. They are, however, all important and the ALPBP project seems to have brought together the most that good research, carefully and creatively pursued, can offer at this time.

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Background To The Language Proficiency Assessment Symposium ¹

This and the accompanying three volumes are composed of selected papers which were presented at the Language Proficiency Assessment Symposium (LPA), held March 14-18, 1981 at the Airlie House Conference Center in Warrenton, Virginia. The Symposium was planned and implemented as a component of the Assessment of Language Proficiency of Bilingual Persons (ALPBP) project. The goals of the ALPBP project, funded by the National Institute of Education (NIE) (1979) and administered by InterAmerica Research Associates, Inc., were:

- to pursue fundamental research on the nature of language proficiency and how it can be measured; and
- to provide teachers with up-to-date knowledge of language proficiency assessment (issues) so they can improve their classroom assessment practices (p. 5).

The LPA Symposium represented a major effort toward integrating both the insights gained from findings emerging from the research component and the implementation of the teacher training programs of the ALPBP project. The Symposium provided a forum where a broad spectrum of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers met to discuss the major issues and research findings which affect language proficiency assessment practices.

Researchers were represented by scholars involved in the development of models of communicative competence, related empirical research, and the development and validation of tests of language proficiency and/or communicative competence. Practitioners included teachers and school administrators engaged in the implementation of programs which require the application of language proficiency assessment strategies. Policymakers were individuals who play an important role in the funding of education research projects related to language proficiency assessment and who are influential in the establishment of policy in this area.

The participants interacted through the presentation of papers, reactions to presentations, and informal discussions. The main goals of the Symposium were selected by the organizers based on the issues identified in a survey of researchers and educators.

The goals were:

- to develop a working definition of communicative proficiency;
- to make recommendations for the assessment of language minority students for the purpose of entry/exit into appropriate educational programs; and
- to make recommendations for further research and to develop a research agenda.

In regard to the first goal, the Symposium participants acknowledged the need to clarify the nature and scope of communicative competence and its relationship to language proficiency. It was evident that some agreement among researchers and practitioners, along with much more conclusive information about the nature of language and how it should be measured, would be necessary to clarify the concepts. However, the recognized knowledge gaps and the diversity of perspectives, theories and research findings concerning the nature of language and its measurement, prevented the LPA Symposium participants from reaching a consensus. Issues which related to this topic are found in the volume, *Communicative Competence Approaches and Language Proficiency Assessment: Research and Application*. The issues addressed range from theoretical questions regarding the construct of communicative proficiency to research relating communicative proficiency to literacy related skills. Language tests and testing methodologies are major topics addressed. Questions are raised as to what tests should be measuring and why. The issue of reliability of currently-used language proficiency assessment instruments was of great concern. Thus, the participants endorsed the development of more appropriate measures.

Issues related to the second goal are addressed in this and the subsequent three volumes. *Ethnographic Sociolinguistic Approaches to Language Proficiency Assessment* has as its focus a multidisciplinary approach to language proficiency assessment and to the development of innovative methods for analyzing patterns of children's language use. The research presented involves what has been called ethnographic/sociolinguistic approaches which places emphasis on the understanding of language use through the observation of children's language in naturally-occurring contexts. These approaches are in contrast to the use of traditional testing and experimental research methodologies.

The relationship between a learner's first and second language development and performance in school are the focus of the volume entitled *Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement*. "A major reason for the confused state of the art of language proficiency in bilingual programs . . . stems from the failure to develop an adequate theoretical framework for relating language proficiency to academic achievement," argues Cummins. He contends that without such a "framework it is impossible either to develop rational entry/exit criteria for bilingual programs or to design testing procedures to assess these criteria". The validity of the framework proposed by Cummins is debated in this volume.

The concerns of practitioners, researchers and policymakers, which relate to the assessment and placement of language minority students in bilingual education programs, are the theme of the volume *Placement Procedures in Bilingual Education: Educational and Policy Issues*. This volume focuses on the legal and practical implications of federal guidelines with regard to language proficiency assessment practices.

In meeting the third goal, the LPA Symposium provided a structure for participants to make practical recommendations directed at influencing federal and state policies regarding language proficiency assessment research and practices. The papers in all four volumes represent the participants' understanding of the various issues. The following is a summary of the conclusions reached and the recommendations made by the three groups represented at the Symposium — researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

The primary concerns of the researchers were:

- The need for basic research into the nature of language that can provide the foundation for clarifying the concept of communicative competence and its relationship to language proficiency;
- The need for applied research that expands on current understanding of the state of the art of language proficiency assessment;
- The need to undertake validation studies of currently available language proficiency assessment instruments;
- The development of multiple language assessment strategies that include both quantitative and qualitative components;
- The need for adaptable government guidelines that affect language proficiency assessment practices;
- The need for yearly meetings between researchers and practitioners to exchange information and ideas.

The major issues identified by the practitioners were:

- The need for a working definition of communicative competence that clarifies its relationship to language proficiency;
- The establishment of practical as well as adaptable federal guidelines affecting language proficiency assessment practices;
- The importance of maintaining a network of communication between practitioners and researchers;
- The importance of obtaining up-to-date information on language proficiency assessment practices through more extensive use of resources such as the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE);
- The use of the LPA Symposium as a model for future meetings among practitioners, researchers and policymakers involved in language proficiency assessment practices that affect minority language students;
- The support of federal agencies in encouraging collaborative research, an example of which would be including as criteria in Requests for Proposals (RFPs) the participation of practitioners at the local level.

The issues of most importance, as seen by the policymakers, were:

- The need to establish federal guidelines that can be adapted to accommodate relevant research findings that have bearing on the application of language proficiency assessment practices;
- The need for federal agencies such as NIE and OBEMLA to continue to support applied research on issues related to language proficiency assessment through grants and other forms of funding;
- The need for federal agencies to support research that is carried out as a joint venture on the part of researchers and practitioners.

It is believed that the work presented in the four volumes will add new insights into the issue of language proficiency assessment. It is also believed that the research and theoretical perspectives offered represent a positive step toward attaining the overall objective of developing effective language proficiency assessment procedures and, ultimately, a more equitable education for language minority students in the United States.

CHARLENE RIVERA
FORMER ALPBP PROJECT DIRECTOR
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Notes

1. It should be noted that Multilingual Matters, Ltd. was not the publisher which originally agreed to publish these volumes. They reviewed them late in 1982 only after being introduced to them by Jim Cummins. Although the volumes were delayed in their publication more than anticipated, it has provided the opportunity for the contributors to the volumes to substantially revise and update their papers.

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National Institute of Education 1979, Assessing the language proficiency of bilingual persons (RFP No. NIE-R-79-0012). Washington, D.C., May.

INTRODUCTION

The papers presented in this volume have been drawn together because each presents some aspect of ethnographic research methodology or a theoretical perspective involving an ethnographic approach to language testing that contributes to the improvement of bilingual language proficiency assessment. The motivation for the use of ethnographic methods is a concern with the apparent inadequacies of current methods of language proficiency assessment of language minority students.

While many criticisms have been made of tests of written and spoken language skills that are currently used, the major weakness of such tests, from a sociolinguistic and ethnographic perspective, is that they fail to consider the consequences and implications of functional differentiation in the use of two languages by the bilingual ¹ child.

When a child uses one language for some social purposes, and his or her second language for other social purposes, as is commonly the case in bilingual communities, that functional differentiation will be reflected in vocabulary that is specialized in each language. This differentiation will also be encountered in semantic relations, syntactic constructions, and discourse formats that are controlled in one language, but not in the other. Thus, for example, it is common to hear Mexican-American bilingual teachers state that even though Spanish is their stronger language, and perhaps the language in which they have the greatest functional range, it is initially difficult to teach school in Spanish. The reason for this, they contend, is that school talk is precisely the kind of talk that they were always required to produce in English the entire time they themselves had been going through school.

Redlinger's (1978) work on bilingual mothers' speech to children suggests the consequences of such differentiation for children's competence in two languages. The mothers interviewed by Redlinger reported that they used English to praise their children and Spanish to scold them, among other functional differences. It would be logical to assume, then, that a child *praised* in Spanish and *scolded* in English would generally show less English comprehension in the classroom than that same child praised in English and scolded in Spanish.