Academic & Social English for ELL Students: Assessing Both with the Stanford English Language Proficiency Test

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September 2003 (Revision 1, November 2003)
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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has brought an increased focus on the assessment of English Language Learners (ELL students) and on what an appropriate assessment of these students should encompass. Cummins (1979) initiated the discussion of the importance of academic and social language in ELL instruction by describing two different communicative aspects of English: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALPS).

Since the introduction of the concept of BICS and CALPS, it has become widely accepted that for ELL students to be successful in school, they must achieve communicative competence in both social language and the academic language of the classroom. In keeping with this understanding, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) developed standards for ELL instruction that include both social and academic language. TESOL (1997) has established three broad instructional goals for students at all age levels:

Goal 1: To use English to communicate in social settings
Goal 2: To use English to achieve academically in all content areas
Goal 3: To use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways

The TESOL goals have become the model for many state English language development standards. Therefore, the question is whether the language uses described in the TESOL standards are being assessed by English language proficiency tests—that is, do ELP tests assess both social and academic English?

While conducting research for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, Bailey and Butler (2002) of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) concluded that

“... most existing English language proficiency tests do not assess the type of language students must understand and be able to use in the classroom and on standardized content tests. Instead they tend to assess more social everyday language rather than the more academic language (AL) of the school setting.”

This statement begs the question: What exactly is the type of language that students must understand and use in the classroom and on standardized content tests?
Teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) were surveyed by Solomon and Rhodes (1995) to discover what they thought the linguistic expectations for ELL students were who enter mainstream classes. Bailey and Butler (2002) summarize the survey results:

“... AL [academic language] had different meanings for different teachers; some defined AL in terms of the language needed by students to effectively participate in classroom activities that included discrete aspects such as specific vocabulary and parts of speech, whereas others defined AL as the major functions of language in the classroom such as summarizing, categorizing, comparing, and contrasting.”

To better identify the AL that should be assessed with an ELP test, we need to refocus on the main purpose of an ELP test: to assess students’ general English language ability. Since the assessment of academic content is the domain of an academic achievement test, it is necessary to separate language that is integral to that content from other language used in the classroom environment to teach the content, but which is not the content itself.

This other academic language, which is used to deliver instruction—provide directions, explain processes, make assignments, discuss grades, plan school events, etc.—can generally be designated as functional academic language.

The new Stanford English Language Proficiency Test (Stanford ELP), published in 2003 by Pearson, assesses both social language and functional academic language. The most readily observable feature of Stanford ELP is that it mirrors the style of a native English speaker academic achievement instrument, namely, the Stanford Achievement Test Series, Tenth Edition (Stanford 10). The page layout of the Stanford ELP test booklet—header and footer text, and wording of directions and samples—employs language and images that mirror the Stanford 10, thus providing students with necessary exposure to the specialized functional academic language of an assessment instrument.

Functional academic language is prevalent in each subtest of Stanford ELP. The Reading subtest, using the native speaker assessment as a model, is a comprehensive and balanced reading assessment that measures three main areas—decoding, vocabulary and idioms, and comprehension. At every test level—Primary, Elementary, Middle Grades, and High School—a variety of reading item types address these assessment objectives. To align the Stanford ELP as much as possible with the goals of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), items in the Reading subtest measure two modes of comprehension: initial understanding and interpretation.

The Stanford ELP reading passages consist of three genres—literary, informational, and functional—and are parallel to the types of passages found in native speaker reading assessments. These passages are similar to texts used in classrooms around the nation to teach different content areas and to enrich the literary experience of students. The passages, written by published authors of literature for native English speaking children and young adults, also reflect the kinds of text students encounter in their everyday lives.
The Listening subtest also features functional academic language, including conversation found in classrooms and among students talking about school topics. Listening stimuli present scenarios such as giving instructions about homework, discussing classroom or school activities, and giving directions to places in school.

**Examples**

The examples shown below demonstrate how functional academic language has been incorporated into the Stanford ELP items. The examples are similar to items found in the Stanford ELP subtests of Listening, Speaking, Writing, and Writing Conventions.

**EXAMPLE 1—Listening, Middle Grades Level**

**Question**

*Where will you work on your group science project tomorrow?*

**Listening script (Dictated only)**

*Listen to the phone message from your classmate from school. Hi, this is Julie. I hope you got the science books from the library. Let’s meet at 2:00 o’clock tomorrow at my house and then walk over to Sam’s—his house is at the corner of Sunset and River Road. We can finish our project on recycling there. Don’t forget—we’ve got to turn in all our work to Mr. Thomas at school next Thursday.*

**Answer options**

- A  *
- B
- C
- D
After listening to and reading the question, the student looks at the illustration while listening to the script. The student then decides which option, labeled A, B, C, or D in the illustration, is correct and marks it on the answer document.

The context of Example 1 is a group of students working together on a science project. Thus, the item requires the test taker to comprehend and synthesize functional academic language that is needed when students work together cooperatively (i.e., get science books from the library … let’s meet at 2:00 o’clock … we can finish our project on recycling there … we’ve got to turn in all our work to Mr. Thomas at school next Thursday).

EXAMPLE 2—Speaking (Social Interaction), High School Level

Items grounded in academic contexts are found throughout the Speaking subtest. This example, typical of a conversation that might take place at school, addresses sociolinguistic competence. The stimulus is the first part of a conversation, a single sentence, to which students respond with an appropriate rejoinder.

Prompt
I don’t remember how many pages the teacher wanted us to read.

Possible student responses
I know.
Neither do I.
These are the pages.

EXAMPLE 3—Writing, Primary Level

Academic situations are portrayed in the graphics of writing prompts, as shown in this example. The picture of two boys with a microscope can elicit a wide range of language from students that will demonstrate their understanding of schools and classroom procedures, teaching and learning, and students and their behavior.

Prompt
Directions: Look at the picture. Write about what you see in the picture. Tell a story about this picture.
EXAMPLE 4—Writing Conventions, Elementary Level

Some Writing Conventions items exemplify tasks that are commonly used for studying language. One such task is shown in this example, which requires students to read a dictionary definition and then apply their understanding.

**DICTIONARY**

**Cu•ri•ous (kyoor' ĕ-as)** _adj._ 1. Very interested in getting information or knowledge.

*Based on what the dictionary says about this word, which sentence is correct?*

- **A** Carol is a curious student so she asks a lot of questions in class. *
- **B** Carol is a curious student so she always finishes her homework on time.
- **C** Carol is a curious student so she is going to be in the fifth grade next year.
- **D** Carol is a curious student so she likes doing math problems better than reading.

**References**


