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Why are first-generation and newly immigrated ESL students frequently misdiagnosed with learning disabilities?

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A thesis for partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Bachelor of Arts in Spanish Literature and Educational Studies

Swarthmore College

21 May 2017

Introduction

The beauty of the United States education system is that anyone can get a free public education, regardless of race, ethnicity, citizenship status, gender, sexual orientation, or otherwise. All children in the U.S. between the ages of 5 (4 in some states for Pre-Kindergarten) and 22 are eligible for public schooling, and that doesn't change for children that speak languages other than English at home, or children that have recently immigrated from foreign countries. Although the system is far from perfect, variations of programs like English as a Second Language (ESL) help students that speak languages other than English at home to improve their English and their overall schooling experience. Unfortunately, with a heavy influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants over the past 10 years, school personnel have been exposed as being underprepared and undertrained, leaving a large percentage of students to suffer academically, socially, and professionally. This thesis will explore the reasons for which newly-immigrated and first generation, Spanish-speaking ESL students are often misdiagnosed as disabled in Chesterfield, Virginia, which is one of the most overwhelming problems schools are facing under the current educational framework not only in Chesterfield, but all over the United States.

Chesterfield, Virginia, where my research is based, is the fifth-largest county in Virginia, just thirty minutes to the south of Richmond, with a population of about 330,000 people. In 2013, 7.7% of the reported population in Chesterfield was Hispanic, compared to 8.2% in 2015. Similarly, there were roughly 17,000 reported Spanish-speakers in 2013, compared to roughly 19,000 in 2015. El Salvador is the most common country of origin among immigrants in Chesterfield, followed by India and Mexico respectively. In 2013, an estimated 96.9% of the county were citizens of the United States, whereas in 2015 that number dropped to 95.2%, which

is still higher than the national average of 93%.¹ These numbers show that over the past four years there has been a significant increase in Spanish-speaking immigrants in Chesterfield, who are largely from El Salvador. I will later explain how these numbers affect education and why teachers are struggling to keep up with the number of Spanish-speaking students that are entering the county every year.

Last summer (2016), I was fortunate enough to work for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Chesterfield, Virginia, as an interpreter and intake-administrator. I was responsible for interviewing families that came to our office with intentions of enrolling their children in the public-school system, as well as administering the English proficiency test (WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) to the students. The W-APT is only administered to students that speak a language other than English at home, and it is scored on a scale of 1-6 (further information follows in the Literature Review). What this means is that I was responsible not only for administering the test, but also interpreting the results and determining the level of proficiency that the student possessed. Admittedly, as a college student with minimal experience in the field, I was underqualified to be performing the tasks that I took on day-in and day-out.

Experience aside, I learned the ins and outs of the job quickly, and soon discovered that the ESOL Department in Chesterfield faced quite a few problems that I felt were causing academic hardships among the students, and families, that we served. Among the various problems that ESOL endures on a day-to-day basis, assessment weaknesses, poor teacher training, and lacking pedagogical support at the school level are the most glaring. Interestingly, these issues are not exclusive to ESOL, as they spill over into other educational programs like Special Education and Title I. Since many students that receive support from ESOL also receive

¹ "Chesterfield County, VA." *Data USA*. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

services from other programs like Special Education (warranted or not), the problems that ESOL faces are not unique to them, but unique to the demographic they serve.

By examining exclusively Spanish-speaking students of Salvadoran descent, this thesis will suggest an answer to the main research question of why newcomers and first-generation Spanish-speakers are tied to Special Education programs, and are often mislabeled as disabled. In addition, it will suggest answers to questions about how to improve assessments, whether bilingual education is truly successful, and how one would help a native Spanish-speaker succeed in an English-only school. Using my ethnographic research and observations as the main sources of data for the thesis, I will draw conclusions about why ESOL is underserving Spanish-speakers and will suggest improvements that could be made to reconcile its shortcomings.

Review of Literature

The Demographics

There were approximately 26,000 English Language Learners (ELLs) in Virginia in 1998, and trends are indicating that there will be upwards of 120,000 ELLs in Virginia in 2018, just 20 years later. In 2014, nearly 70% of the ELL population in Virginia was Spanish-speaking, with 222 other languages making up the other 30%. In the same year, over three thousand ELLs were being served in Chesterfield County, Virginia, compared to the nearly 100,000 ELLs that make up the entire state.² As I stated in the Introduction, Spanish is the second most-spoken language in Virginia, behind English, and these numbers show that the same is true for students in ESOL.

² Tate, Veronica. "English Language Learners in Virginia's Schools." Virginia Department of Education/Office of Program Administration and Accountability. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the academic year 2011-2012, 88.9% of Special Education students were non-white. It has been well-documented over the past decade that minority groups are grossly overrepresented in special education programs, and ELL students are no different. Consider the following quotation by Goldenberg (2008):

“By far, the majority of ELLs—80 percent—are Spanish speakers. This is an important fact to bear in mind, since Spanish speakers in the U.S. tend to come from lower economic and educational backgrounds than either the general population or other immigrants and language minority populations” (10).

Statistically, Spanish-speaking students are already more apt to be placed in special education programs due to the socioeconomic backgrounds that they primarily belong to, but when adding Spanish-speaking ELL students to the equation, the ratio becomes even more lopsided. To fix this problem, it is evident that educators need to learn to “distinguish students who truly have learning disabilities from students who fail for other reasons, such as limited English proficiency (Ortiz, 2001).³ Due to the structure of the assessments being given, and the lack of training that teachers are provided with, ELLs are often disadvantaged from the start because their struggle with English is misinterpreted as some sort of intellectual struggle, which is typically not the case.

Teachers

The literature is adamant that undertrained teachers are failing ELLs because they are unknowledgeable about what it takes to acquire a second language. Harper, de Jong, and Platt (2008) suggest that the reason for teachers’ lack of knowledge in regards to ESL and related

³ Fernandez, Nicole, and Albert Inserra. "Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education." *TESLEJ*. The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Aug. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

programs is because of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001). They suggest that NCLB “fails to recognize English as a second language (ESL) as a specialized academic discipline in which teachers should be ‘highly qualified.’”⁴ Instead, NCLB focuses on the core academic subjects, which include English language arts, reading, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography. NCLB says that “all public-school teachers must be “highly qualified” to teach in core subjects,” meaning they “must have: (1) a bachelor’s degree, (2) full state certification or licensure, and (3) prove that they know each subject they teach.”⁵ NCLB neglects to require the same qualifications for ESL teachers, to which Harper, de Jong, and Platt write vehemently:

“NCLB ignores the role of the specialized teaching skills needed to render content area instruction more accessible to ELLs, who must simultaneously learn new concepts through a new language as well as learn the new language itself. ESL teachers are excluded from the NCLB specifications of who must be highly qualified to teach,” which therefore “denies its value (ESL) and status as curriculum “content” and reinforces the common assumption that teaching ELLs requires little more than a set of pedagogical modifications applied to other content areas.”⁶

Case and Taylor (2005) prove that teaching ELLs does indeed require more than standardized pedagogical frameworks, as they outline the large overrepresentation of ELLs in Special Education classrooms due to the lack of trained teachers:

⁴ Harper, Candace A., Ester J. De Jong, and Elizabeth J. Platt. "Marginalizing English as a second language teacher expertise: The exclusionary consequence of No Child Left Behind." *Spring Science and Business Media* (2008): Web.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Harper, Candace A., Ester J. De Jong, and Elizabeth J. Platt. "Marginalizing English as a second language teacher expertise: The exclusionary consequence of No Child Left Behind." *Spring Science and Business Media* (2008): Web.

“The fact that ESL students have continued to be heavily overrepresented in special education programs is testament to the need for a clearer understanding of the factors that educators must consider prior to referring an ESL student for special education services.”

The disconnect between teachers, the assessments they are giving, and the knowledge necessary to serve ELLs is so great that ELLs will continue to struggle until something is done about it. Looking at the assessments we administer to ELLs is the first step, because as NCLB has established, assessments drive instruction, and with broken assessments the teachers that we expect to promote second-language learning will continue to fail.

Assessment

Assessments are a huge part of how students get enrolled in programs like English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Just like the numerous assessments it takes to enroll in ESL, students also take similar tests to discover learning disabilities, and therefore be eligible for Special Education services. According to a study by Limbos and Geva (2001), due to the lack of research on ESL learners and reading disabilities, teachers are sometimes unable to correctly distinguish between ESL and L1 (low literacy), and therefore are hesitant to refer a student in question. Since most student assessments require teacher referral before they are given to the student, and there is a lack of research about these diagnoses in academia, there is tremendous crossover between ESL students and students identified as eligible for Special Education services.

In Chesterfield County, Virginia, as well as counties in 36 other states in the U.S, ESL students are given the WIDA-ACCESS Placement Test (W-APT) to qualify for ESL services. The W-APT is an English proficiency test that screens incoming students that have been labeled

as possible English Language Learners (ELLs), as well as students who speak a language other than English at home. According to wida.us, “test items and forms were developed, piloted, field tested, and reviewed...in partnership with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and as a collaborative effort of consortium member states.”⁷ The test was designed not only to determine a student’s eligibility for language support services, but also to assess the student’s language proficiency level. The W-APT tests performance of five key standards: Social and Instructional Language, Language of Language Arts, Language of Mathematics, Language of Science, and Language of Social Studies. Furthermore, the test is broken into five grade-level clusters: Kindergarten, Grades 1-2, Grades 3-5, Grades 6-8, and Grades 9-12. “Each form of the test assesses the four language domains of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing,” and “is designed to be individually administered and adaptive, meaning that parts of the test may be discontinued as soon as the student reaches his or her performance ‘ceiling.’”⁸

The problem with an assessment like the W-APT is that, in theory, anyone can administer the test, and, although the results are to be interpreted using a set of guidelines established by the writers of the W-APT, the results are almost entirely subjective. According to wida.us, “It is recommended, but not required, that test administrators complete the ACCESS for ELLs training course prior to administering the W-APT.”⁹ Based on my experience with the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Department in Chesterfield in 2016, I would estimate that most people administering the W-APT have not had formal training, but instead use their experience in the field to help them administer and score the test. Personally, as a rising senior in college on the path to receive a degree in Spanish and Educational Studies, I watched approximately four

⁷ "W-APT." *WIDA: W-APT*. Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ "W-APT." *WIDA: W-APT*. Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Web. 19 Mar. 2017.

W-APTs be administered and then moved on to administer and score them myself, which essentially made me alone, entirely responsible for accurately measuring a student's English proficiency level. As I mentioned earlier, I was not nearly qualified enough to hold the responsibilities I did at the start of my time with ESOL in Chesterfield.

In states that don't use the W-APT to assess ELLs, state codes sometimes get completely regulated by the test's publishers. Somewhat like the W-APT that is used in Virginia, in which the test publishers establish guidelines to score the test, the Stanford English Language Proficiency Test (SELP), which is used throughout Arizona, suggests cut-off scores that are essentially recommendations for a stoppage in ESOL services and an introduction to mainstream schooling, where English is the only spoken language. In Arizona in 2006, after the SELP was reintroduced to reclassify ELLs, teachers reported that the test was "too easy," and that students were not as ready as the test suggested for mainstream education. Mahoney (2008), argues that validity studies should be conducted before adopting English proficiency tests such as the SELP, to validate the classifications being given to ELLs, which ultimately leads to their class placements.¹⁰

As my experience with a singular ESOL Department should convey, teachers and administrators all over the country are largely unqualified to assess English Language Learners, even more so when the question of disability is added to the equation. Since tests like the W-APT and SELP are highly sensitive, meaning that a positive screening result (standards vary per state, and even county) will almost always identify a student as being qualified for ESL services, students are often mislabeled because their true needs are not accurately assessed. According to Limbos and Geva (2001), "knowing that a test is highly sensitive gives little information on the

¹⁰ Mahoney, Kate. *The assessment of emergent bilinguals: supporting English language learners*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017. Print.

utility of a positive screening result, because many students could still be falsely positive. That is, they could be identified as at risk when, in fact, they are not” (138). In other terms, a student could test very poorly on the Reading and Writing portions of the W-APT, but could do reasonably well on every other section. Due to the way that the W-APT is scored, that child would be placed into ESL, and would most likely receive an “at-risk” label for a reading disability. What Limbos and Geva say about this phenomenon is that a highly sensitive test like the W-APT is sometimes unable to accurately gauge the capabilities of the students. As a result, “professional and school personnel have been delaying diagnosing children learning English as a second language (ESL) with learning disabilities for up to 4 or 5 years in order to allow time for proficiency in the language to develop”¹¹ (136). Validating these tests, as Mahoney (2008) suggests, wouldn’t immediately fix the problem, but it would help establish a more stringent set of guidelines for administrators to consider before placing ELLs into inappropriate levels and classes.

Models of ESL and Bilingual Education

While it is clear that full immersion into the English language is not the correct approach for ELL students when trying to assimilate, the research has yet to decisively say which forms of ESL and bilingual education are the most appropriate. There are a handful of issues to consider when trying to determine how to best approach educating an ELL student; home language, teacher qualifications, and acculturation are just a few. Arguably the most important issue to consider is the home language of the child. Is the student’s native language one that is spoken or understood by anyone that will interact with the student every day? If not, how will they best be

¹¹ Limbos, M. M., and E. Geva. "Accuracy of Teacher Assessments of Second-Language Students at Risk for Reading Disability." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 34.2 (2001): 136-51. Web.

served? Additionally, is the ELL student's main teacher certified in ESL or are they knowledgeable about second language acquisition? "Cummins (1997), Krashen (1981), and McGlothlin (1997) suggest that a lack of understanding of second language acquisition by mainstream teachers might influence the high number of referrals of ELLs to special education classes."¹² Lastly, a knowledge of acculturation is important so that educators can accurately and decisively determine if a student has a learning disability or is struggling due to some other cultural significance. Students that have not yet acculturated, which "Collier (2004) describes as the process of acquiring English (in a new culture) while maintaining the dominant (native) language,"¹³ might do poorly on an English proficiency test due to a variety of reasons:

"The person administering the bilingual evaluation might not have the background to accurately interpret the results of the assessments. Additionally, ELLs who are not proficient in their native language or not literate in their native language might perform poorly on the bilingual assessments. Hence, the results of the assessment are often skewed to appear that a child has a learning disability when in fact the child is still in the process of acquiring a second language (Kohnert, Yim, Nett, Kan, & Duran, 2005)."¹⁴

"The literature suggests that it takes between five to seven years to fully acquire academic language (Cummins, 2002). Cummins has also noted that it could possibly take seven to ten years for ELLs to fully acquire academic language when they are not proficient in their native language (Cummins, 2002; Collier, 2004)."¹⁵ So, if it takes between 5 and 10 years to fully acculturate, and demonstrate full understanding of both a native language and English, then

¹² Fernandez, Nicole, and Albert Inserra. "Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education." *TESLEJ*. The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Aug. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Fernandez, Nicole, and Albert Inserra. "Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education." *TESLEJ*. The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Aug. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

¹⁵ *ibid*

why do educators expect ELL students to perform so much quicker, and when they don't, why are they immediately referred to Special Education? "Collier has suggested that ELLs should not be evaluated for at least three years in order to determine if they are struggling due to lack of acculturation or due to a learning disability."¹⁶

When determining which form of bilingual education best suits ELLs, if at all, it is important to look at the research to know how ELLs are most likely to thrive. According to Fernandez and Inserra (2013), "ELLs who receive all of their instruction in English were almost three times as likely to be in special education as those who receive some native language support. It can be inferred from this data that instructional programs implemented in schools could decrease the amount of ELLs in special education programs." There are a multitude of reasons that mainstream English education often doesn't work for ELLs, the main reason being that the teacher is not qualified to teach ELLs, or knows very little about second language acquisition. For similar reasons, bilingual education is not always the best option. Fernandez and Inserra (2013) say that the difference between social language and academic language is often too great in bilingual education settings, leaving ELLs disadvantaged: "Students may have a wealth of social language and may appear to understand English but they may not understand academic language," which is what we know to be tested on ESL assessments like the W-APT. For the aforementioned reasons, among others, it is preferred by most counties to place ELL students in separate ESL classrooms, with "trained teachers," that are able to provide more individualized attention, to maximize language development. The problem around the country, though, is that untrained educators are inadvertently disserving ELLs by lacking the necessary knowledge to help them succeed in the classroom.

¹⁶ Fernandez, Nicole, and Albert Inserra. "Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education." *TESLEJ*. The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Aug. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

Methodology

In order to answer my research questions, I drew upon my experiences with ESOL in 2016. I collected data by documenting my experience enrolling students (ELLs) in the Chesterfield County Public School System, by taking notes on my every-day encounters with students and their families, and administering English proficiency tests (W-APT) to potential ELLs. After deriving a set of research questions to investigate, I went back into the student files to collect a set of assessments that would help to support my argument. In total, seven Spanish-speaking students' W-APT scores were analyzed to determine if the literature is consistent with my observations in the field. The students were aged 15-21 years old, were new to Chesterfield, and were all of Salvadoran descent. The students were given pseudonyms to provide anonymity.

Results and Data Analysis

If there is one quotation that correctly encapsulates what this research was all about, it is as follows:

“...the scores do not validate their true understanding and academic progress (Collier & Thomas, 2004). The need for a clearer understanding of the factors that educators must consider prior to referring an ELL for Special education is evident by the overrepresentation of ELLs currently labeled with learning disabilities (Case & Taylor, 2005).”¹⁷

I investigated the W-APT to obtain visible evidence that the way the test is currently administered to ELL students, especially those in their teenage years, is not adequately

¹⁷ Fernandez, Nicole, and Albert Inserra. "Disproportionate Classification of ESL Students in U.S. Special Education." *TESLEJ*. The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language, Aug. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2017.

measuring their level of total English proficiency. By looking at the evidence, I hoped to find potential factors for why teachers look to additional resources like Special Education to “help” improve ELLs’ English-language learning. To do so, I picked out seven similar students, aged 15-21, that were all Spanish-speaking and new to Chesterfield County, where I conducted my research. Three boys and four girls’, who I named Alejo, Barbara, Camila, Diego, Elisa, Flor, and Girsan to provide anonymity, test scores were examined starting from their entry year into the program, which allowed me to follow their progress for three additional years (two in the case of Diego). I chose this group of seven because they were all Spanish-speaking students of Salvadoran descent, two of them (Alejo and Diego) were labeled Special Education students, and they all tested into ESOL services at a level 1 or 2, which we term “principiantes de inglés” (beginners of English) in ESOL.

Although I was not the initial test administrator for the seven students I selected, meaning I was not the intake-administrator that enrolled them when they first arrived in Chesterfield County, I did test five of the seven in their yearly re-test of the W-APT in 2016. The W-APT is taken yearly by every ELL that still qualifies for ESOL services. The W-APT grade scale runs from 1.0-6.0, 1.0 being completely new to the English language and 6.0 being completely proficient, having native English-speaker-like similarities. All seven students whose scores I chose to analyze entered the county with scores between 1.0 and 2.3, and after their fourth year in the program received scores ranging from 2.2 to 4.0. Alejo, Camila, and Diego were unable to graduate with their age-appropriate grade due to their poor test results, and Diego dropped out of school as a result, after his third year in ESOL. Barbara, Elisa, Flor, and Girsan are all still in ESOL, and Elisa is the only student that could feasibly graduate on time, with her age-appropriate class.

The data that I collected, which was the W-APT score reports from four consecutive school years (three for Diego), suggests that ESOL is doing a poor job of preparing ELLs for graduation, due to their inability to master English with enough proficiency to pass the Virginia-state standardized tests that are required for a high school diploma. While the literature (Cummins, 2002) states that it takes 5 to 10 years to fully acculturate into another culture, some scholars (Collier, 2004), suggest that three years is enough to obtain enough proficiency in a foreign language for other issues, like learning disabilities or other cultural distractions, to be ruled out. Assuming that 3-4 years is a valid amount of time for a student that is completely new to the English language to learn enough to “get by” in school, and graduate, when you look at Figure 1, you can only wonder why, seemingly, the overwhelming majority of ELLs are unable to become English-proficient.

There are a couple of reasons for the underwhelming score reports for the seven students I chose to analyze, and explanations for their seemingly-low performances. The biggest and most controversial reason for the low scores is that the W-APT tests different aspects of the English language than ELLs are learning in the classroom. As Fernandez and Inserra (2013) suggest, there is a drastic difference between social and academic English that is being learned across ESL and Bilingual Education models throughout the U.S, and if tests like the W-APT assess too much academic English without considering the social English that many ELLs are indeed learning in and outside the classroom, then it is an inaccurate assessment of their complete language proficiency.

Looking at Figure 1, one may glance at the upward trend of the data and think, “Those look like positive results, are they not?” However, while the upward trends may be aesthetically pleasing, they represent very poor test scores that indicate that ESOL is not

adequately serving newcomers. You must score a 5.0 to “place out” of ESOL services, meaning you get to enter the mainstream classes and begin earning valid credits for graduation, and as Figure 1 shows, the seven students selected were far from the passing-threshold.

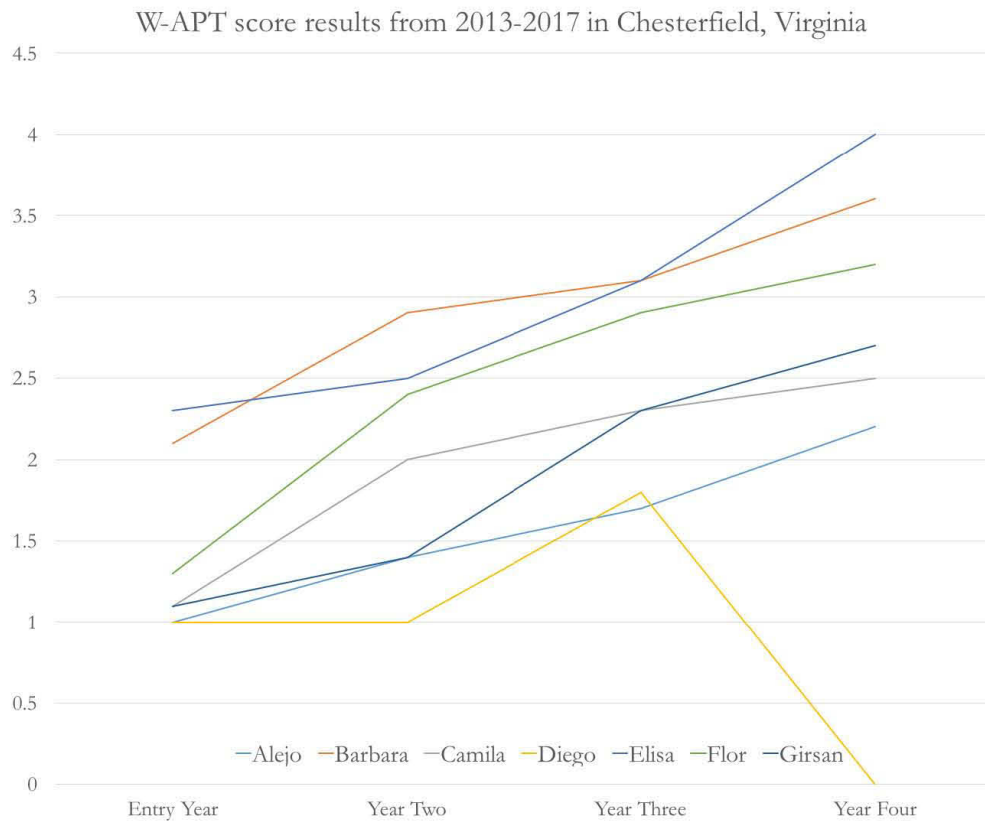


Figure 1

All students, except Diego, were in ESOL for four consecutive years, yet Elisa is the only one that may feasibly graduate on time, if at all.

The other main issue for low score reports can be attributed to the fact that many (4) of the seven students were exposed to mixed language environments on a day-to-day basis. Barbara and Elisa were in ESOL classrooms in high school with large Chinese populations, where they would extensively hear Mandarin throughout the day. Trying to learn English as a native Spanish-speaker, in an environment that is not completely conducive to learning English, is

incredibly taxing. Similarly, Alejo and Diego received Special Education (SPED) support in addition to their already hectic schedule, which included mainstream and ESOL classes. In SPED, they received individualized guided reading support in English and Spanish, in order to improve their reading levels. Their Special Education diagnoses were controversial, as the literature would support, because they were still so new to the English language. They were put into SPED largely because they had low reading levels in their native Spanish, but mostly due to their minimal formal education in their home country.

Unfortunately, cases like those of Alejo and Diego are often the norm in ESOL and affiliated programs. Due to the interrupted formal education that many newcomers enter the U.S. with, teachers often scramble to find resources that they think will help ELLs learn how to learn, and therefore expedite the English-learning process. What educators often fail to realize though, is that second-language acquisition takes more than three or four years, especially when you have an interrupted educational history and parents with their own personal literacy struggles.

Due to factors like past gaps in education, ELLs often jump numerous educational hurdles that resemble the struggles that go hand-in-hand with learning disabilities. Goldenberg (2008) attributes some of ELLs' low academic achievement to what he calls their inability to "transfer."¹⁸ That is, their inability to decode words in English that they have not yet learned in Spanish, or their lack of comprehension strategies to help them transfer one term in English to a related term that they already know in Spanish. For these reasons, teachers and Special Education "professionals" often jump to diagnose ELLs with learning disabilities due to their low reading comprehension, which can largely be attributed to the way tests like the W-APT are

¹⁸ Goldenberg, Claude. "Teaching English Language Learners – What the Research Does—and Does Not—Say." *American Educator*. 2008.

administered, the knowledge they actually test, and the lack of strategies that ELLs possess to succeed on an English-proficiency test.

Proposals for Improvement

To fix the numerous problems presented, policy-makers in Virginia need to first focus on assessments, followed by proper teacher-training and pedagogical support for ELLs. The W-APT needs to be revamped to test more social language, that will allow for a more comprehensive examination of an ELL's progress in the classroom. Testing not only material that is culturally irrelevant for ELLs, but also academic English that they don't see or hear until they take a test is not an accurate way to gauge proficiency, nor is it an ethical way of administering an assessment. Redeveloping the standards to make them more comprehensive, and providing opportunities like specific career training, will help ELLs climb the grading scale more easily, but will also allow them to learn enough English to graduate with the necessary credits and language proficiency.

Similar to a revamping of the test that so often puts ELLs into a corner, ESOL classes need to be adjusted, to promote bilingualism and the usage of the home language. Being realistic, most ELLs that enter the United States as teenagers, like most of the seven students I examined, won't be in school long enough to learn enough English to graduate with a valid diploma, so educators need to be practical in terms of how they prepare them for life after high school. Career training programs and the promotion of seeking community college opportunities within the classroom would make positive impacts that would lead to careers that aren't solely based in the service industry, as is common with ELLs.

After addressing problems with assessments, teachers need to be educated and trained to teach ELLs. Furthermore, NCLB needs to be edited to say that *all teachers*, regardless of if they are Special Education, ESL, or otherwise, need to be qualified and knowledgeable about the subject matter and demographic they are teaching. As I have pointed out using authors like Case and Taylor (2005) and Harper, de Jong, and Platt (2008), teachers are unqualified to teach ELLs because they are unknowledgeable about what it takes to learn a second language, and often unable to relate to Spanish-speakers at all. Finding teachers that speak Spanish would be a start, but finding teachers that know how to promote bilingualism and support life outside of school is more critical to ELLs' success beyond the classroom.

Along with teachers being too unqualified to serve ELLs as the system currently exists, the home language is often dropped to the lowest ring of importance, which I believe is inappropriate. The literature suggests that a strong understanding of the home (native) language is important to promote growth in a second language, and an ESOL program that fosters that support is critical. Furthermore, an education about Special Education, learning disabilities, and what it takes to acquire a second language is crucial for educators to have before they recommend an ELL for Special Education, and even before they set up an education plan for them in the classroom. While the literature is still divided on what form of education is most important for advanced language proficiency, it is clear that a balance of social and academic English is necessary to grasp the fundamental rules and variances of the English language, which is what the W-APT should really be testing.

The last proposal for a more successful ESOL Department in Chesterfield, as well as in similar counties around the country, is a more focused pedagogical support system that introduces cultural relevance in ESOL content for ELLs. Academic English does little to prepare

ELLs for the world outside of school, as I have mentioned, and practically, most ELLs won't be attending four-year colleges directly after high school. Changing the pedagogical approach to include more social language, which ELLs have proven to learn more of anyway, would better prepare them for a promising career, and could potentially change the way they learn academic English as well. Providing support in technical training and more-focused school material might be a better way to reach ELLs, because it's clear that the current system is doing a poor job of assessing and enhancing their English-language skills.

A more comprehensive language education policy that focuses on altering assessments, properly training teachers, orienting pedagogical frameworks, and specifying ESL educational policy is ultimately what is needed to fix the piece-meal solutions that are currently "serving" English Language Learners. The grace-period of learning how to serve the influx of ELLs coming into Chesterfield, and similar counties, is over, and action needs to be taken to fix the inadequate services that are currently being provided. Following the suggestions that have been brought forward in this thesis will not completely fix the problem, but should open the door to further improvements, as educators perform trial-and-error practices to improve overall ESL education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, first-generation and newcomer English Language Learners are being misdiagnosed as disabled due to the material on the assessments they are given to assess their English-language proficiency, teachers' inabilities, and misguided pedagogical frameworks. Making focused efforts to perform an overhaul on the W-APT in Chesterfield, Virginia, would allow ELLs to better-demonstrate their abilities, and would help test administrators to better-

assess students' strengths and weaknesses with the English language. A large part of the issue is identification, and since instruction tends to come from assessments, validating the assessments to facilitate improved identification would help teachers to better-serve ELLs. Furthermore, improving teacher training and the qualifications required to teach is critical to success within ESOL, along with shifting the focus of the pedagogical framework that teachers use. These things, along with the support of the state, would not only help to better educate ELLs to improve their English-language proficiency, but would also put them in classes they belong in, with students of similar strengths and capabilities. As a result, newly-immigrated and newcomer Spanish-speakers would be removed from inappropriate programs like Special Education, and would finally start to acculturate into American culture, leading to educational success that, to date, only native English-speakers have been able to attain.

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