Uses of Formal and Informal Assessments of English Language Learners in a Language Experience Class, School Year 2007-2008

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This paper will compare the uses of selected formal and informal assessments of English language learners (ELLs) in the Language Experience class [TRANSLANGEXP7(&8)-008] at Kimball Middle School, Illinois School District U-46, Elgin, Illinois, during school year 2007-2008. See figure 1 (page 14) for a graphic display of these assessments and their use. Results from using these assessments over the year will be reviewed. The paper will conclude with recommendations for the 2008-2009 school year.

Purpose of the Class

The Language Experience class is designed to be an intervention class for seventh and eighth grade ELLs who are working at English Language Learning level 3 (ELL 3) (developing). Students are placed in this level based on district standards established in conjunction with measures developed by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium (2008). Native English speakers and ELLs who have either exited or refused participation in the ELL program at Kimball Middle School move through a series of six-week exploration classes on a “rotation” schedule. ELL students are assigned to year-long intervention classes. ELL 1 and 2 students participate in Spanish Language Arts classes. ELL 3 students go to the Language Experience class. ELL 4 students go to a different computer-based intervention class. This class is conducted in one of the two computer labs at Kimball Middle School. The purpose of the class is for students to work with English, improving essential skills in English proficiency and content, while engaging in a variety of computer-based activities. Because most of our ELL students do not have access to computers or the Internet outside of school, the class

is designed for students to complete their work in class on the school's computers. Those who can find access outside of school, e.g., at the public library, are encouraged to do so. Because students come to the class with a variety of skill gaps, the course consists primarily of individualized instruction using computer software and projects designed to build skills and to promote engagement in learning. Once skills have been built to a baseline, some team activities and projects are introduced, though the primary tool for reading and engaging in the learning in this class is by way of the computer. Students may enter or leave the class based on changes in their English proficiency level. This year, several students entered at various points during the year and no one exited because of a change in English proficiency.

Formal Assessment

Illinois School District U-46 (U-46) has adopted the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests published by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). "MAP is used in all schools and has been very helpful to teachers in determining how well students are mastering skills and understanding concepts" (2008). According to the NWEA, MAP tests "are state-aligned computerized adaptive tests that accurately reflect the instructional level of each student and measure growth over time" (2008a). One of the reasons U-46 adopted the MAP tests was because of the correlation between growth in MAP test results and improved outcomes on the Illinois State Achievement Tests (ISATs). Students are measured for yearly progress on the ISATs. Because the results of the ISATs are not published in a way to impact instruction throughout the year, the ISATs and preparation activities for the ISATs are specifically excluded from this paper.

Frequency and Use of MAP Tests

ELL students in the Language Experience class were tested three times during calendar year 2007-2008, in September, 2007 (referred to by NWEA as the "Fall" test window), in January, 2008 (referred to by NWEA as the "Winter" test window), and in May, 2008 (referred to by NWEA as the "Spring" test window). Students were tested on two MAP measures, the Math Spanish Sounds Survey with Goals 6+ and the Reading Survey with Goals 6+ IL Ver 2. Scores are reported in terms of Rasch Units (RITs) (NWEA, 2008b).

All test items are placed on the RIT scale according to their level of difficulty. Each increasing RIT is assigned a numeric value (RIT score) that indicates a higher level of difficulty. MAP tests are adaptive in that, as a student takes a test, he or she is presented with items of varying levels of difficulty. Once the MAP system determines the difficulty level at which the student is performing, the system collects enough data to report on the student's abilities and the test ends. The student is assigned an overall RIT score. In surveys with goals tests, students also receive RIT range scores for the goal strand components. The normal ranges for RIT scores will fall between 140 and 300. Each score is at an equal distance from each other score so that the RIT scores can serve as a "meter stick" against which progress can be measured. The distance between 140 and 160, for example, is the same distance as between 220 and 240 (NWEA, 2008b).

MAP tests used by the district have written questions in English. Newcomers (ELL 1 students) took the math test in the Fall and did not begin the reading test until Spring.

Informal Assessments

The purpose of using these informal assessments was to stimulate and to measure engagement in learning activity by the students. Emphasis was continually placed on mastery learning more than ability learning. Research indicates that frequent positive feedback and evaluation influences learning and increases the level of positive engagement in learning activity (Butler, 2006).

MAP Feedback and Compass Learning

In addition to providing immediate feedback on the results of the tests, NWEA also offers specific breakdowns of suggested gap-filling curriculum based on separate goal strand RITS. (This is not available for the math tests taken by the students in the Language Experience class.) Compass Learning Odyssey (2008) is an NWEA partner with specific on-line interactive learning programming designed to create specific assignments for learners based on their MAP scores and RITS for separate strands. U-46 conducted a pilot of this software this year and six students in the Language Experience class actually worked with the software in January and February, 2008. The software had a series of informal assessments and reports built-in that teachers could access at any point. The reports would tell the teacher how much time a student had actually invested in a task, what days he signed-on to the program, how many tasks he had completed so far. Teachers could design tasks to be self-reinforcing, i.e., if a student failed to reach a pre-set benchmark, he would recycle to an earlier point and review (re-do) the assignments.

Skills Tutor

U-46 provided site licenses to selected Skills Tutor learning modules. Skills tutor (which students see as "MySkillsTutor" on their computer) contains "over 1600 basic skills and thinking skills lessons focus on the fundamentals of learning. Quizzes and tests quickly identify skill deficiencies and prescribe appropriate lessons. Students feel comfortable practicing skills in an engaging environment similar to standardized tests" (Achievement Tech, 2008). Students completed a series of mastery projects set-up by the teacher. Students earned 100 class points for each project mastered at 90% or better. Students received immediate feedback from the program and could re-do all sections except for pre-tests (which are not included in the mastery requirement). Students progressed at their own pace and reports were instantly available for the teacher to observe how students are working and areas in which they are challenged. Additional incentives were provided as students began to achieve mastery in one or more projects—they could use earphones and listen to music as they worked once they had three projects completed at 90% or better. Three initial projects were set for all students: Using maps, charts, and graphs; using dictionaries and books; and using references. Eighth graders were assigned one additional project for their baseline: Using consumer information. A Skills Tutor Lesson Alignment chart was provided by Achievement Tech for MAP RIT scores in math and reading. Beyond these initial mastery projects, students engaged with lesson modules designed to build skills in math and reading.

Kids College and Kids College Contests and Workbooks

U-46 secured site licenses for an interactive learning program offered by Learning through Sports (2008) called Kids College. Students in the Language Experience class had

access to this program for one month before the ISATs and continued to work with the program after testing. As students first engaged with the program, it put them through a series of diagnostic question on math, language arts, and reading. Starting at grade level, it then adjusted its questions downward until the appropriate grade level was reached according to the student's ability. Once the diagnostic test was completed, students were offered questions on math or language arts and reading or on a combination of all of these topics, based on selections made by their teachers. Students in this class were working to come to eighth grade level in math, reading, and language arts. The way the program worked, students were asked a series of questions. Once they answered a pre-set number of questions correctly, they were allowed to be a virtual player on a virtual team in one of six sports. They could play the game for between 20 seconds and 40 seconds, depending on the time allowance set by the teacher. They earned points in the games and were given virtual awards and paper awards as they progressed through the competitions. In order to stimulate students to engage with the English-only software, initial settings for Kids College were established as 30 seconds of playing time for every three questions answered correctly. As students engaged more fully, the requirement increased to four questions answered correctly, then to five questions answered correctly. All students in the Language Experience class were entered into a pool of 78 students who competed in Kids College Contests. Every week for four weeks prior to the ISATS the top five students in the "all sports" category were selected and won, in addition to Kids College certificates, gift coupons for snack bar purchases at the Kimball MS snack-bar. The points they had earned were printed on their coupons.

After students completed the diagnostic assessment at the beginning of their engagement with the Kids College software, the software generated a learning activities workbook, tailored for each student from a bank of activities, designed to help the student build grade-level skills in math, reading, and language arts. These workbooks were available in Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) format on the computer. The average size of entire workbooks for students in the Language Experience class was 574 pages. Teachers (and students) had the option of printing selected activity pages and completing them for points outside of class. Kids College also provided a set of answer keys for all of the activities in the workbooks. In addition to the workbooks, Kids College made available a series of reports for the teacher, based on individual students and for classes regarding engagement with the program and skill mastery. Points earned in the virtual sports competition had no link to learning beyond the fact that questions had to be answered correctly in order to earn time to play the sport. The classroom "sparkled" with the excitement and enthusiasm generated by student engagement with the Kids College program. Many students who were otherwise not engaged in their studies became significantly engaged in the Kids College contests. By the third week winners had accumulated (from "scratch" each week) more than 100,000 points. Students enjoyed working with the learning activities in the workbooks. These activities were aligned with activities in math and reading texts and were presented in an informal way that motivated engagement. Several students asked for more workbook pages for extra credit. 50 class points were awarded for completion of approximately 50 workbook pages. Some of these pages were reading only and others had activities connected with the reading.

Web Quests and Problem-Based Learning Projects

After completion of the ISATs in early March, students began working on a Web Quest with a built-in problem-based learning project on global warming and its impact on Arctic animals. This project had embedded graphic organizers and rubrics students worked with, alone and in teams, as they began to apply what they had learned about conducting research from the Skills Tutor modules. Students viewed streaming video-clips about global warming, went to the school library to look-up Arctic animals in hard-copy materials, and continued their research on-line, following a series of structured questions and activities designed to focus their engagement toward the completion of a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation that would show the results of their work and answer six questions about global warming and its impact on the Arctic animal they had selected to work with. Students working on the same animal had conferences with the teacher and each person or team received regular one-on-one coaching from the teacher as students progressed through the project. Once students had begun finalizing their presentations—which included pictures, text, and references for their material, they engaged in peer reviews using the rubrics and questions provided with the Web Quest. These peer reviews, self-assessments, and formative feedback from the teacher led to continued refinement of their projects. On the last day of class, each person or team's completed presentations were shared with the class.

Observations and Electronic Student Portfolios

Throughout the year the teacher practiced assessment "by walking around," connecting with each student as the student engaged in learning activities. Mini-goals were celebrated as students attained "mastery" scores of 90% or more on aspects of their projects. Using the

LanSchool classroom management program (2008) provided by U-46, the teacher actively observed students as they worked on the computer and intervened as needed with help or to redirect students back to task-related activity. Student screens could be broadcast to all computers in the classroom to show examples of good work. Electronic student portfolios were created by viewing materials saved in student folders on the school's server and extracting representative samples of student work for conferencing and grading purposes.

Results from Using These Assessments

Formal Assessment Results

Students completed the third set of MAP tests in May, 2008. The class average for the MAP RIT score for the math survey moved from 206 in September to 215 in May. The nine point increase exceeds the expected ±3 points expected as variation on RIT scores. 17 students improved their RIT scores in math with a combined improvement of 107 points. Seven students decreased their RIT scores in math with a combined decrease of 32 points. The class average for the MAP RIT score for the reading survey was 190 in September, 2007; 197 in January, 2008; and 195 in May, 2008. Nine students increased their RIT scores in reading by a combined total of 51 points. 14 students decreased their RIT scores in reading by a combined decrease of 137 points.

Informal Assessment Results

Students were actively engaged in learning activities throughout the year. All students attained mastery level on the Skills Tutor projects and worked actively with the Kids College program. On the end-of-year Web Quest, all students participated and, while individual

challenges persist in terms of the mechanics of English, only two students failed to meet the basic requirements of the Web Quest. These two students did engage to the point of achieving some of the requirements for the project. Students wanted to celebrate achievement of short-term and longer-term mastery goals. They were enthusiastic and excited when they reached mastery and called the teacher over to their computers to help them celebrate. Once several students had achieved mastery in one area, the other students were motivated to do the same so that they could move to a new area of challenge. Limited access to music was a useful enhancement to learning. Access could continue only while satisfactory progress was being made on additional work requirements. Students who became too distracted lost their music privileges.

Conclusions and Recommendations for School Year 2008-2008

This paper compared the uses of selected formal and informal assessments of English language learners (ELLs) in the Language Experience class [TRANSLANGEXP7(&8)-008] at Kimball Middle School, Illinois School District U-46, Elgin, Illinois, during school year 2007-2008. Results from using these assessments over the year were reviewed. The paper now concludes with recommendations for the 2008-2009 school year.

Use of Formal Assessment

NWEA MAP is the district-approved formal assessment used to monitor growth in math and reading skills. As such, it will continue for the next school year. In order to focus learning and instruction most effectively, students should continue to take the MAP test in all three testing

windows. The value of the math survey with Spanish audio is not clearly demonstrated. Students have difficulty hearing what is said and it may not add significant value to their test experience. At the same time, NWEA and Compass Learning do not support the results of the survey with Spanish audio in the same way they do the survey without the Spanish audio. It may be advisable to switch all students to the English-only survey so that they can benefit from the gap analysis offered by NWEA and Compass Learning.

Use of Informal Assessments

Mastery learning as a focus for the stimulation and measurement of learning activity proved to be effective this year. These results are consistent with research results (Butler, 2006) and should be continued next year. Software-supported projects that provide immediate feedback and recycling for mastery should also be continued next year—Skills Tutor and Kids College. Compass Learning was not tested sufficiently to assess its impact as yet. Because it is tied directly to the MAP RIT scores, it may offer additional support. Unfortunately, this software is not configured for mastery as much as for general goal attainment. Butler's research indicated that focusing on general goal attainment was less effective than focusing on mastery.

This year students demonstrated a significant gain in MAP RIT scores in math. In order to stimulate similar growth in reading, the work on Web Quests and problem-based learning activities should begin earlier, perhaps as early as November. There is more reading and writing activity involved in these activities and that may result in an overall improvement in both English proficiency and comprehension in the content areas covered in the Web Quest. As with

Kids College, short-term goals and prizes need to be offered in connection with the Web Quest activities to stimulate more enthusiasm and excitement about that activity as well.

Kids College should be continued as a year-long project for the students. By having the students enter themselves into contests—and thereby having to sign-on to a new Kids College account each time, the diagnostic assessments will be repeated and teachers can track progress over time based on engagement with the program.

Figure 1

Uses of formal and informal assessments of ELLs
in Language Experience class, school year 2007-2008

Benefits:

- On-line NWEA MAP tests measure specific performance & compare scores to others in different locations.
- Tests are criterion-based, standards-based, and adaptive.
- Longitudinal assessment is used K-8 for all students in the district.
- Specific support is available to tie instruction to learning gaps identified on the assessments.
- Tests show evidence of progress.
- Tests are conducted 3 times per school year--Fall, Winter, Spring.
- Results inform instruction--Results are timely—available within 24 hours after the test window closes.
- Tests are correlated to state tests (including ISAT).

Formal Assessment

NWEA-MAP Testing in math and reading/language arts (National Evaluation Association, 2008)

Risks:

- NWEA-MAP tests—May have cross-cultural gaps, may depend on missing background knowledge, may not accommodate diverse learner needs, may not represent true knowledge or mastery. Results are influenced by student motivation or temporary discomfort.
- Existing provisions for audio support for Spanish-speaking students do not fully allow limited English proficient to fully comprehend the questions.

Both

- Inform instruction
- Are timely
- Are tied to performance standards
- Are integrated an self-reinforcing
- Provide a more holistic picture of each student
- Encourage development of academic vocabulary in multiple content areas

Benefits:

- Results are immediate.
- Outcomes inform instruction.
- Assessment is part of instruction-no extra time is required.
- Assessments provide shared basis for feedback and reflection.
- Assessments show evidence of learning, progress, and process.
- Assessments promote self-regulation of learners.
- Assessments encourage engagement in learning activities.
- Assessments are frequent.
- Many data collection moments are available.
- Adaptable to the needs of

Informal Assessments

1. Observations
2. Graphic organizers
3. Web Quests & PBL Activities
4. Rubrics
5. Skills checklists
6. Portfolio assessment
7. Conferencing
8. Peer review
9. Self assessment
10. Mastery Assessment-on-line
11. Kids College Contests

Risks:

- Time-consuming
- Require teacher focus (reducing availability to class)
- May be biased or subject to classroom environmental issues.
- Teacher skills influence quality

(Fradd & Lee, 2001; Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & and Cabello, 2001, p. 10; National Evaluation Association, 2008)

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