

Improving Testing for English Language Learners by Rebecca J. Kopriva

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Abstract:

This article is a review of the book “Improving Testing for English Language Learners” by Rebecca J. Kopriva.

Keywords: Book Review | English Language Learners | Testing | Teaching

Improving Testing for English Language Learners

Rebecca J. Kopriva. New York: Routledge. 2008. Pp. xi + 344.

Improving Testing for English Language Learners is a comprehensive book that provides relevant information on testing English language learners (ELLs) from kindergarten through twelfth grade in schools in the United States. The author, Rebecca J. Kopriva, blends her research background and experience with current issues surrounding the testing of ELLs. In selected chapters, she also collaborates with other leading researchers to provide more precise information on the topics covered. Specifically, this book examines test use by focusing on the interaction of the test-taker and content tests, rather than on language proficiency assessments. Kopriva currently works for the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as a visiting researcher. She has also served as a testing director for various states as well as the U.S. Department of Education. This book, in fact, can be viewed as an extension of her previous research. She explains in the preface and chapter 1 that this book is not necessarily meant to be read cover to cover. Rather, each chapter stands alone as a reference on a particular topic. If the reader needs more background on ELLs, he or she can begin with the first chapters. However, if the reader already has established background knowledge, s/he can refer to those chapters which address his or her particular needs or interests.

This book is best viewed as a reference for teachers, administrators, researchers, upper-level undergraduates, and graduate students interested in understanding the most effective methods for testing ELLs (e.g., providing appropriate testing accommodations). Kopriva's approach relies largely on quantitative methods (e.g., descriptive and inferential statistics) to provide an overview that is both descriptive and analytical. However, she does not address test impact or the implications of test use, per se. Rather, she focuses on the construction of the testing instrument and test score interpretation.

The author divides the book into twelve chapters, beginning with background information about the book and ELLs, and ending with detailed reviews of each of the considerations essential for the test development process, from understanding the target population through test design and score interpretation. Each chapter contains a comprehensive overview of research on the given subject as well as a discussion of emerging trends. As comprehensive as each chapter is, Kopriva admits that she can only offer a glimpse into the topics of discussion and debate surrounding testing. Therefore, she also makes suggestions for further readings.

The preface, chapter 1, and chapter 2 clarify the context and content of the book. In the preface, Kopriva presents the book as "a snapshot at a point in time" (p. xiii) and cautions that, while it provides solid references, the circumstances surrounding the testing of ELLs are constantly changing. In chapter 1, "Purpose and Overview," the author gives an explicit rationale for including each subsequent chapter. This overview serves as a preview of the entire book, allowing the reader to identify the chapters most relevant in addressing his or her needs. Although dense, by first providing a rationale for the book as a whole, then for each separate chapter, the structure of this overview makes the content of the text accessible to readers with varying experience testing ELLs. In chapter 2, "Changing Demographics in a Testing Culture: Why This Issue Matters," Kopriva notes the increasing number of ELLs in U.S. public schools and details some of the cultural and linguistic challenges that this diverse group of students faces. Rather than taking a

position herself, Kopriva describes how researchers in anthropology, psychology, and sociology approach issues facing ELLs. She then transitions into the assessment of ELLs by explaining the unique demands placed on ELLs taking content exams, including the clarity of the directions and wording of each individual test item. This chapter effectively presents the case as to why testing of ELLs is a controversial and complex issue that deserves immediate attention. Unlike some language testing researchers (cf. Shohamy, 2001) who emphasize the impact of testing by demonstrating various consequences, intended and unintended, that test-takers face, Kopriva's focus is instead on the instrument itself and beneficial changes that can be made.

In collaboration with Susan L. Rigney and David E. Riley, Kopriva extends her argument for making changes to the test in chapter 3, "The Past as Preparation: Measurement, Public Policy, and Implications for Access." Beginning with an overview of large-scale testing from the early twentieth century, the authors transition from a discussion about policy and practices to the evolution of testing and measurement, with significant attention paid to the changing definition of validity, which has added rigor to the test development process. The authors then continue with a fifty-year overview of federal policies on achievement tests, emphasizing current policies in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation and the movement towards standards-based teaching and assessment. These changes are linked to the emergence of more accessible tests, with a growing emphasis on how ELLs, in particular, interpret tests. Test accessibility for ELLs, also referred to as test transparency, are procedures that help clarify the test tasks and purposes to ELLs before test administration, ensuring that ELLs understand aspects of testing ranging from test format (e.g., multiple choice, essay, etc.) to how scores can affect ELLs (e.g., by restricting or granting access to ELL services, grade promotion or retention, etc.). Although this chapter is dense in terms of its discussion of psychometric issues, its scaled focus from macro-level policies to micro-level test design illustrates the complex milieu surrounding the testing of ELLs.

Chapter 4, "Getting Started: Issues of Participation, Alignment, and Validating Access with Test Specifications," clarifies the preliminary processes associated with test development and item construction by addressing who makes the decisions of what to test and which method would be most effective. Language test development is described as a collaborative process that includes experts in testing and linguistics, but also as one that gives prominent roles to educators with experience working with ELLs. Kopriva then discusses the importance of aligning the test to match the standards of the curriculum in order to show how teaching and testing are interrelated, and the importance of documentation during this process to increase transparency in testing. The author argues that the inclusion of transparency in testing is an important advance in the field, and an emerging trend which helps researchers explore the interaction of test-takers and the instrument.

The background on the beginning stages of test development provided in chapters 1 through 4 serves as a smooth transition into chapters 5 through 8, which focus specifically on enhancing assessments that already exist for an English-literate population (e.g., altering test items by adding visuals for ELLs with low English proficiency, or modifying the lexical or syntactic complexity of test tasks). Chapter 5, "Providing the Foundation of Principled Test Construction: Maintaining the Integrity of Target Items," gives a comprehensive overview of item writing, with step-by-step procedures and multiple examples that explicitly show what this process looks like. This is followed by chapter 6, "Access-based Item Development," which gives a more nuanced perspective on many of the potential concerns that come to bear when testing ELLs. Such concerns

include contextual factors (e.g., addressing prior learning expectations) and structural factors (e.g., having the appropriate amount of text for each item, or providing additional tools and resources during test administration). Again, Kopriva provides examples from research that allow the reader to have a clear picture of what these testing practices look like.

In contrast to the focus on individual items in chapters 5 and 6, Chapter 7, “Tools, Test Forms, and Reviews,” provides a broad overview of the testing environment for ELLs. First, Kopriva describes some of the tools that may be made available during test administration, such as manipulatives or bilingual aids. She then outlines the factors one must consider when choosing the format or test form, such as the language of the assessment or the physicality of the test (e.g., pencil and paper or computer-based). This presentation provides background for a more detailed analysis of the language of the assessment instrument in chapter 8, entitled, “In What Language Should English Language Learners Be Tested?” In this chapter, Kopriva, in partnership with Guillermo Solano-Flores and Elise Trumball, examines how the language of the assessment affects teaching, learning, and testing. To address the language-specific issues of testing content knowledge, the authors focus on language proficiency defined in terms of communicative competence rather than discrete elements of language. This conceptualization of proficiency provides a dynamic view that, while difficult to operationalize, is the “most comprehensive and useful approach for evaluating a student's language proficiency” (p. 185). The chapter ends with an overview of how tests are currently being altered to meet the needs of ELLs. Changes to the test response, administration, or test itself are referred to as testing accommodations (Abedi, 2008) and are the focus of chapters 9 and 10.

In chapter 9, “Relevant Accommodations and Pretest Support,” Kopriva offers definitions and examples of common test accommodations currently in use in U.S. public schools. Accommodations, such as the oral use of a student’s first language in a testing situation, address the linguistic needs of ELLs, while others may provide support without specifically addressing the linguistic needs of ELLs (e.g., small group administration or extra time). This information is then fused with the demographic information offered in chapter 2 to make suggestions for appropriately assigning accommodations to specific populations of ELLs. Together with Jennifer Koran, in Chapter 10, “Proper Assignment of Accommodations to Individual Students,” Kopriva outlines which student-specific factors (e.g., language proficiency, cultural proximity, and U.S. schooling experience) need to be considered when choosing accommodations for ELLs. Each of these factors is examined further to capture a more complete picture of the student. They outline multiple methods that can be used to assign accommodations, including policy and research approaches, as well as inductive and deductive methods. While the authors both have extensive experience researching accommodations for students with disabilities and accommodations for ELLs, one shortcoming is that they do not explicitly address whether or not research on accommodations for students with disabilities is directly applicable to ELLs. Rather, they use research on students with disabilities to highlight possible options available for use with ELLs. Despite this shortcoming, the authors present a clear evaluation of the process of assigning accommodations to ELLs, highlighting the lack of clear guidelines.

The final chapters on scoring demonstrate interpretation of ELLs' responses so that the score accurately reflects their content knowledge. In chapter 11, “Scoring Considerations for English Language Learners,” Kopriva first addresses many of the possible effects that language

learning has on responses from ELLs. Similar to the structure of chapters 5 through 8, Kopriva provides definitions and research-based examples that make the concepts such as *invented spelling* (i.e., beginning writers using their own spelling conventions, spelling *when* as *wen*) accessible to the reader. The chapter then shifts from test responses to a focus on test scoring, and how to prepare test raters. Kopriva stresses that the rater training process is important and should be extensive in order to ensure that students' scores are accurate on more subjectively graded tasks such as writing and speaking. The final chapter, "Selected Technical Considerations," begins by outlining the importance of research design to answer questions specific to the needs of students, teachers, schools, and administrators. Following this discussion, proposed forms of data analysis are divided into quantitative and qualitative sections. Although the descriptions provide a basic explanation of these methods, there is by no means enough information to allow the reader to appropriately apply a method. Rather, the overviews give the reader enough information about each method to know if it can be used to investigate his or her own questions about the test data, and point the reader in the direction of a larger body of research in order to gain a fuller picture of the uses of each method.

When viewed as a reference guide, *Improving Testing for English Language Learners* fulfills its goal of providing research-based evidence for a discussion of how tests can be enhanced to meet the needs of ELLs. However, this is done at the expense of offering a critical look at some of the broader issues that ELLs face when being tested in U.S. public schools (cf. Menken, 2008). Nevertheless, this comprehensive book on testing ELLs brings together research that could prove invaluable as demand for testing in primary and secondary schools increases.

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