

Translating “No Child Left Behind” for English Language Learners and TESOL Professionals

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This paper examines the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on the education of English Language Learners (ELLs) and the professionals who work with them. An overview of NCLB is provided with emphasis given to the areas of accountability issues, flexibility, and teacher quality. Furthermore, implications for professionals in the field will be explored. Special attention will be given to the role of Teacher Education Programs in interpreting and implementing this new mandate. The commitment of Teacher Education Programs to prepare highly qualified teachers includes meeting the needs of ELLs so they attain high academic standards while increasing their English language proficiency. This is a very timely issue given the projected increase in the number of ELLs in Florida and the challenges these students face because of linguistic and cultural differences.

Translating “No Child Left Behind” for English Language Learners and TESOL Professionals

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001 is the latest reauthorized version of the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act originally passed in 1965. In an effort to offer equal educational opportunities to all children, ESEA was created. One of the most important components of the ESEA was Title I, which addressed the needs of children from low socioeconomic status who were not academically successful.

However, Title I did not meet the needs of all children who did not have access to equal educational opportunities particularly those with limited English proficiency. Thus,

additional legislation was passed to meet the needs of children who were not fluent in English.

In 1968, the Bilingual Education Act Title VII was passed under the ESEA. The purpose of the Bilingual Education Act was to assist students with limited English proficiency in achieving academic success. The U. S. Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs administered Title VII until the passage of NCLB. Most recently Title VII was renamed Title III, Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students of the NCLB. Presently, the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA) administers Title III.

The goals of Title III are to:

- support English Language Learners attain English proficiency;
- assist English Language Learners achieve high levels in content area subjects;
- develop and enhance high quality educational programs for English Language Learners;
- promote family and community involvement to facilitate ELL academic achievement;
- implement formula grants whereby state educational agencies receive federal monies and then allocate the funds to the local educational agencies according to the number and needs of the ELLs;
- hold SEAs and LEAs accountable to the adequate yearly progress of the ELLs; and

- provide flexibility for program implementation based on scientifically based evidence (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 2001).

From the perspective of English Language Learners (ELLs), there are numerous concerns related to NCLB specifically regarding accountability, flexibility, and teacher quality. The controversy surrounding NCLB stems from the implementation of the act, not what it purports to do which is challenge all students and close the academic achievement gap for those who are behind. Unfortunately, many of the students who are at risk for academic failure have limited English language skills, which seriously affect their academic achievement. The consequences of poor academic achievements include high dropout and retention rates, high unemployment, high underemployment, and at risk behaviors.

Issues related to accountability

One of the major challenges to NCLB is in the area of accountability. A strategic goal of the USDOE is to transform education into an evidence-based field. This translates directly into NCLB's mandate to increase accountability of student performance. The Act requires that all students, regardless of English language proficiency, be tested annually in reading and math, and eventually science. In addition, NCLB requires the inclusion of ELLs in grades 3 to 12 in the state achievement test process. Thus, these students are one of the critical groups for which assessment of yearly progress and disaggregating of data is required by law.

While most would agree that students need to achieve adequate yearly progress, few would agree that the best way to collect these evidences is with the exclusive use of standardized tests. Unfortunately, the guidelines for implementation require high-stakes

testing for accountability and decision-making. The high stake consequences for ELLs are of utmost concern since it is difficult for these students to do well on standardized tests because they are not fluent in English. As pointed out by Pompa (2003), there must be a differentiation between content area assessment and assessment of English language proficiency.

In the state of Florida, English language standards are the same for students fluent in English and those who are not (NABE News, 2003). Achievement of the standards is measured by the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). Although accommodations, such as extended time and use of a dictionary, may be made for ELLs, these do not necessarily make a significant difference (Pappamihel, 2003). ELLs continue to obtain the lowest scores. Yet, important decisions on promotion and graduation are made using the FCAT scores.

Issues related to flexibility

NCLB allows flexibility in the implementation of instructional programs and programmatic decisions provided there is scientifically based research to support the decision. The law does not stipulate which program should be implemented, though clearly the emphasis is on rapid acquisition of the English language.

Although NCLB claims to be flexible in programmatic decisions, it is difficult for local administrators and teachers to deviate from programs and instructional models promoted by federal and state departments of education. Firstly, adequate yearly progress is measured only by standardized tests, which limit the scope of what can be done. In order to ensure that students do well, oftentimes teachers revert to teaching to the test. In addition, decisions should be made in light of scientifically based evidence.

For purposes of NCLB, scientifically based evidence is almost exclusively limited to quantitative research studies (Laitsch, 2003). In the field of second language acquisition and the education of ELLs, studies that fit the restrictive definition of scientifically based research are scarce.

Challenges to Improving Teacher Quality

Is it not true that every child in America deserves a highly qualified teacher? What does a highly qualified teacher mean? What challenges do teachers face? What challenges do students face? This section will discuss the implementation of the NCLB Act in the improvement of teacher quality.

According to NCLB, a highly qualified teacher is one who has a license or certification issued by the State Department of Education, holds at least a bachelor's degree, and has passed a rigorous State Test on subject knowledge and teaching skills. Although many new teachers are able to meet this basic requirement, some do not feel ready or well prepared to meet the challenges of today's educational system and the classroom. In addition, it is a challenge for the students who are faced with many educators who do not feel prepared to teach them.

The purpose of the *Academic Improvement and Teacher Quality Programs* is to help increase the academic achievement of all students by helping schools and school districts ensure that all teachers are highly qualified. In order to achieve this goal, state educational agencies (SEA) and local educational agencies (LEA) receive federal funds on a formula basis, as does the State agency for higher education. The SEAs for higher education provide competitive grants to partnerships involving schools of education, arts,

and sciences along with LEAs. In exchange for receiving federal funds, grantees are held accountable to the public improvements in academic achievement of students.

Most importantly, these funding opportunities provide the flexibility to use these monies creatively to address challenges to teacher quality. For example, it may be used for teacher preparation and qualification of new prospective candidates to the teaching force, recruitment and hiring, professional development, teacher retention, or the need for more capable principals and assistant principals to serve as effective school leaders (Improving Teacher Quality State Grant, 2003).

NCLB combines the funding of federal education programs, including Class Size Reduction Program and the Eisenhower Professional Development Program for math and science teacher training, into performance based grants to states and localities.

Furthermore, these funding opportunities will support the necessary improvement for academic achievement through such initiatives as providing high quality of training for teachers that is grounded in scientifically based evidence.

One approach to improving teacher quality is through professional development. School systems sponsor a wide variety of professional training programs under NCLB. According to research (Sadker & Sadker, 2003), educational reforms suggest that the best professional development programs are able to (a) connect directly to the teacher's work with students; (b) link subject content with teaching skills; (c) use a problem-solving approach; (d) reflect research findings; and (e) are sustained and supported over time. Title III includes a National Professional Development Program that allows Institutes of Higher Education to collaborate with local and state educational agencies to provide professional development activities to improve the education of ELLs. For example, this

will support activities that assist teachers working with limited English proficient students in completing English as a second language or bilingual education certification. In addition, it promotes a career ladder program for paraprofessionals who are seeking to become certified or licensed teachers of limited English language proficient students.

There are several implications of NCLB for Teacher Education Programs (TEP). First, TEPs are challenged to prepare highly qualified teachers through preservice teacher education programs. These programs should incorporate the development of competencies needed to understand linguistically and culturally different ELLs. In addition, TEPs can offer professional development and university courses for in-service teachers. TEP can also become active in policy-making activities at local, state, and national levels because changes in educational policies directly affect them.

In conclusion, there are still many challenges facing ELLs and professionals who work with them. Although there are many opportunities for teachers to foster the academic achievement of ELLs, there are still many nuances in NCLB that need to be addressed. NCLB provides alternatives for professional development and teacher preparation, however scientifically based evidences are required to support funding. A major challenge facing teachers and students is in the complexity of assessment and instructional issues related to accountability. With the assistance of highly qualified teachers who are prepared to teach and assess, ELLs will be able to meet the high academic standards set forth by NCLB.

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