

Bilingual Academic Spanish Proficiency Tests: Assessment of Bilingual Cross-Cultural and Language and Academic Development Teacher Candidates

B. Gloria Guzmán Johannessen and Isabel Bustamante-López
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Abstract

In this paper, the authors outline steps for the development of academic language proficiency tests, assessment instruments used to determine whether teacher candidates' language abilities are adequate to enable them to conduct instruction in Spanish-English bilingual classrooms. The authors argue that it is essential to understand the complexity of the language abilities required of bilingual teacher candidates in the design of valid and reliable academic language assessment instruments. They discuss the utilization of language tests, not as measures to exclude teacher candidates from bilingual credential or certification programs, but rather for the development of courses aimed at enhancing the Spanish language abilities of these teacher candidates. The authors also recognize that teacher candidates, who share the same ethno-cultural background of the students and who have similar social language skills are valuable resources for the education system. They also acknowledge the need for teacher candidates with cultural knowledge and sensitivity and high-intermediate Spanish proficiency.

Introduction

Bilingual programs have been and continue to be harshly criticized in California and in the nation, with some of the criticism concerning teacher preparation and bilingual teachers' language abilities. To obtain a teaching credential with a Bilingual Cross-Cultural Language Development (BCLAD) emphasis, bilingual teacher candidates, need to be tested either through a state proficiency test or follow a teacher preparation program that includes testing Spanish proficiency through a university-adopted test. Grant (1995), as cited by Guerrero (1997), explains that "approximately 17 of the departments of education in the United States have implemented a Spanish language proficiency testing policy for prospective bilingual education teachers."

However, critics believe that tests developed to meet the various states' mandates lack validity because they are usually only measures of oral skills (Guerrero, 1997).

Among the state-adopted tests, the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT) that utilizes The Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) is a tape-mediated oral proficiency test. Test-takers demonstrate their ability by responding to prompts within specific time constraints on topics that are "psychometrically appropriate for examinees at the advanced and superior levels of the ACTFL [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages] scale" (Stanfield, 2001).

At the California State Polytechnic University Pomona, the oral proficiency test used prior to 1999 was a tape-mediated speaking test. For this test, bilingual teacher candidates were asked to provide improvised narrations on two situations, an informal visit with a friend, and a formal visit with parents regarding the academic progress of a student. The test itself took approximately 30 minutes and the analysis of the test between 30 to 40 minutes. It was found that the narrations were too artificial and uncomfortable for the candidates, and the analysis was tedious and highly subjective. The written Spanish proficiency test was based on informal communicative tasks that had hardly any relevance to the academic language that bilingual teachers are compelled to use in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to learn whether bilingual teacher candidates' abilities in basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), as described by Cummins (1984, 2000) were sufficient to enable them to conduct instruction in a Spanish-English bilingual context. They also wanted to explore appropriate ways to assist teacher candidates, who may have acceptable BICS in Spanish but whose limitations in CALP would hold them back from obtaining a BCLAD California teacher credential emphasis. The authors recognize that the development of teacher candidates' academic language skills in Spanish is crucial to their later success as teachers in Spanish-English bilingual classrooms and, by extension, to the success of their students in the public school system. They also acknowledged that the large numbers of bilingual teacher candidates, who developed Spanish language skills informally at home and in their communities but who lack formal academic Spanish abilities, are invaluable linguistic resources needing only further development. It is the education of language minority students in California to acknowledge that these candidates' linguistic abilities and cultural affinity to language minority students are important assets in California classrooms. At this point, certain terms that will be used throughout the study.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, a bilingual speaker is defined as an individual who can adequately function in two languages in both oral and written forms. A bilingual speaker is someone who also seeks to continue using both

languages in various contexts and functions. For academic purposes, it is also essential that a bilingual speaker engages in reading, writing, and using both Spanish and English in more than one context and for various purposes.

The bilingual individual interested in becoming a bilingual teacher needs to be actively involved in using both languages. Furthermore, this individual must also possess a wide range of vocabulary and grammar, because he or she must teach in both languages about a variety of topics in various subject matters, using a variety of media. A bilingual teacher who needs to improve or develop advanced levels of linguistic proficiency confronts a difficult task. Only through reading about a variety of topics in various subject matters and using a variety of media (television, radio, newspapers, books, etc.) can the individual be assured that competency in both languages is and continues to be maintained.

Cummins (2000) distinguishes two types of linguistic proficiencies: basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency. Cummins uses BICS and CALP interchangeably with the terms “conversational and academic languages.” He illustrates the distinction between BICS and CALP based on the,

extent to which the meaning being communicated is strongly supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or supported primarily by linguistic cues that are largely independent of the immediate communicative context.

In the field of foreign languages the term “proficiency” makes reference to the learner’s linguistic abilities. In the 1999 version of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, proficiency is defined as the ability of the speaker “to accomplish linguistics tasks representing a variety of levels.” According to these guidelines, individuals can be classified into four linguistic levels of proficiency: novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior. At the novice level, individuals can communicate minimally with memorized words and phrases. At the intermediate level, individuals should be able to interact in brief conversations in informal settings with some degree of creativity. At the advanced level of proficiency, the bilingual speaker should be able to narrate and describe, using various verb tenses, deal with complicated situations, and converse about topics of personal and general interest in most informal settings. At the superior level, in addition to performing the tasks indicated above, the speaker should be able to handle topics relating to a wide range of general topics and other special fields of interest and expertise. In the development of a language proficiency test for bilingual teachers, the authors decided to adopt this classification.

The following question needed to be answered: What does a bilingual teacher need to know to be successful in the bilingual classroom? To answer this question, it is essential to understand the complexity of the language abilities required of bilingual teacher candidates. By definition, teachers who

have bilingual proficiency must possess a linguistic repertoire that enables them to function in personal interactions, as well as in formal academic situations, in both English and Spanish; that is, they need both BICS and CALP. In addition, teachers must also be able to communicate with parents, students, and colleagues in both oral and written forms. Basically, bilingual teachers need to master formal and informal styles and academic registers.

Proficiency Assessment

Assessing the language proficiency of bilingual teachers requires a test for that specific purpose. The Spanish Proficiency Exam (SPE) was used in our institution to measure Spanish proficiency of bilingual teacher candidates, but the authors also recognized that the SPE had not been specially designed for the purpose of assessing the language abilities of bilingual teachers.

Another concern was that, although the language prerequisite for entrance to the BCLAD credential emphasis is only at the intermediate level, the reality is that bilingual teachers need to have Spanish language abilities at the advanced level. Furthermore, feedback from students already working in academic settings suggested that this test was irrelevant to their work. Some students claimed that, although they had passed the exam with high scores, they did not have the sufficient knowledge of the Spanish language to adequately perform their duties as bilingual educators. Students' feedback pressed the authors to carefully examine the SPE used as the assessment instrument for the Bilingual Cross-Cultural and Academic Language program.

The analysis of the test was aimed at determining whether it assessed the use of the Spanish language for social as well as for academic settings, whether it was culturally appropriate, and whether it met the advanced proficiency level, according to guidelines set by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages; this is believed to be crucial to teachers' success in bilingual settings. Another important element of the test analysis was the focus on the authenticity of the tasks required to establish whether the test items were similar to those that bilingual teachers perform in an academic setting. Analysis indicated that the test:

1. Did not assess the use of Spanish in academic settings;
2. Was not authentically representative of the tasks needed for academic interaction;
3. Provided only a general measure of language knowledge at an intermediate level, according to the ACTFL guidelines;
4. Did not measure cognitive academic Spanish language;
5. Did not provide an adequate measure of BICS in authentic situations.

The results of the analysis of the SPE test strongly suggested a need for a more appropriate assessment instrument.

Design of the New Test

Language assessment requires that several factors be taken into consideration. Bachman and Palmer (1996) believe that “any given language test must be developed with a specific purpose, a particular group of test takers and a specific language use domain.” They define domain as “the situation or context in which the test taker will be using the language outside of the test itself.” Douglas (2000) describes specific elements that must be considered when constructing a test for specific purposes. He states the following:

A specific language test is one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so that test tasks and content are authentically representative of the tasks in the target situation, allowing for an interaction between the test taker’s language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand and the test tasks on the other. Such a test allows us to make inferences about a test takers’ capacity to use language in the specific purpose domain.

Based on Bachman and Palmer’s and Douglas’ definitions, the authors designed a test that included authentic tasks in the target situation, would allow test takers to demonstrate their ability to use language for specific purposes and settings, and would address cultural issues. Test takers would have to demonstrate their language abilities in the target language (Spanish) for academic purposes, common to situations in the classroom and in other academic settings.

Purpose

Bachman and Palmer (1996) state that the purpose of language testing is to enable the tester to make inferences about test takers’ ability to use language to perform tasks in a particular domain. In the design of the BCLAD test, the test needed to:

1. Determine whether the candidates have an adequate level of Spanish CALP to handle classroom teaching in the various content areas;
2. Determine whether the candidates have an adequate level of BICS to communicate effectively with students, parents, and colleagues;
3. Provide diagnostic information about bilingual teacher candidates whose Spanish abilities are not at an adequate level for classroom and school settings.

Preparation for the design of the test required extensive research of textbooks and teaching materials for various content areas used in the United States and in Latin America. Essential to this project was the determination of similarities and differences on how academic content areas are presented in Spanish-speaking classrooms in both English-speaking society and Spanish-speaking societies.

Characteristics of the Test Situation

Test takers are teacher candidates seeking a BCLAD credential emphasis. Upon completion of their teacher education program, it is expected that their teaching positions will be in bilingual elementary or secondary classrooms, requiring them to interact with students, teachers, administrators, and parents, in English and Spanish.

Characteristics of the Test Tasks

The Academic Spanish Proficiency Test (ASPT) was designed to measure BICS and CALP through various tasks and modes. The presentational mode involves communication with an audience in oral or written form. In this mode, the teacher has to be able to give a presentation in Spanish, which requires defining, explaining, giving instructions, summarizing, and providing examples. The interactive or interpersonal mode requires that the teacher be able to communicate with students, colleagues, and parents in oral and written forms. The teacher needs to know how to ask and answer questions, and give advice to students, parents, and colleagues.

Characteristics of the Test Takers

A preliminary study was based on observations conducted by the authors in formal and informal interviews with bilingual teacher candidates. Preliminary results indicated that most students had advanced oral proficiency in Spanish but limited exposure to academic and written Spanish, that is, they had BICS but limited CALP. Findings showed that whereas some of the students had formal instruction in Spanish, others had developed Spanish language proficiency only within familial and social contexts. Most students spoke Spanish with native pronunciation, although they often mixed English and Spanish, with little differentiation between formal and informal registers. To maintain objectivity in the observations, a student survey was developed. The following is a description of the survey.

Student Survey

A survey was conducted to obtain a profile of the students seeking BCLAD teacher credentials at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Students were asked to determine the following:

1. Self-assess the frequency of their use of Spanish language in oral and written forms
2. Identify the contexts in which they use the Spanish language
3. Identify the context in which they acquired Spanish (whether they had learned the language at home or had taken Spanish courses in high school or at the university)
4. Determine the number of years they had received formal instruction in Spanish

5. Self-assess their proficiency in oral and written Spanish
6. Identify when, and in what situations they code-switch
7. Determine their attitudes toward code-switching

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and anonymity was maintained. The total number of students who volunteered to complete the survey was 55.

The results of the survey revealed that only a small percentage of students engage in listening to the radio and television in Spanish (less than 29%), and 28% read on a regular basis in Spanish or use Spanish in professional settings. However, a large percentage (81%) indicated that they use Spanish on a regular basis in social and familial contexts. These results confirmed the need to provide students, who are following a career in bilingual education, with opportunities to engage in academic exchanges in the Spanish language, both within and beyond university boundaries.

These findings also support the need to develop courses that will help bilingual teacher candidates develop the academic language needed in content-area instruction. The results also showed that, even though students acknowledged their own codeswitching (77%), only 21% of them had a positive attitude toward this form of communication.

Measurement of Linguistic Level

The main objectives of the ASPT are to measure the following aspects of language:

1. Phonological aspect: The teacher candidate must have pronunciation that is comprehensible to Spanish native speakers.
2. Morphology/syntax/semantics aspects: The bilingual teacher candidate must have knowledge of the basic structures and vocabulary of the Spanish language.
3. Modes of discourse: The bilingual teacher candidate must be able to adequately communicate in the presentational and interactional modes.
4. Sociolinguistic knowledge: The bilingual teacher candidate must be able to identify and utilize the formal and informal styles, recognize the dialectal differences in students, use a variety of registers, recognize when and where codeswitching is an appropriate form of communication, and identify the Spanish/English interlanguage.

Text Types

Furthermore, the assessment instrument must measure various text types needed in different modes, as required by teaching roles and situations.

1. Presentational Mode:
 - Oral Skills: extended discourse, lecture, and demonstration
 - Formal Written Mode: instructional materials

2. Interactive Communication:

Oral Skills: question-and-answer format, informal and formal conversation

Formal Written Communication: letters, memos, etc.

The Academic Spanish Proficiency Test (ASPT)

In the design of the instrument, the authors gathered information about various test types. First, the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview was considered. This format utilizes an interview to elicit a speaking sample that is rated according to the ACTFL rating scale mentioned above. The interview entails a structured conversation between a trained tester and the interviewee and progresses through four phases: warm-up, level checks, probes, and the wind-down. Level of proficiency is measured through a series of level checks and probes.

Another protocol the authors considered was the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), designed by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). This assessment instrument comprises a series of tasks that are presented to the test taker via a booklet, audiotape, or visual aid. The SOPI evaluation criteria are analogous to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. Malone (2000) reported that several research studies have shown that the SOPI is a “valid and reliable measure of oral language proficiency.”

In the ASPT, the authors adapted elements of the SOPI and Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The ACTFL proficiency guidelines were also used as basis for the test evaluation criteria.

The ASPT format

The ASPT has two forms, the Oral Academic Spanish Proficiency Test (OASPT) and the Written Academic Spanish Proficiency Test (WASPT). The OASPT includes an oral interview that addresses formal and informal contexts. At the beginning of the interview, the tester asks questions aimed at making the student feel at ease and at measuring BICS. For the second portion of the oral test, students are asked to improvise brief presentations on topics related to a teaching career and to content area instruction. It covers questions included in the initial interview that is given to all students entering the teacher credentialing program. This interview takes approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Sample interview items ask the teacher to describe personal qualities that will help him become an effective teacher. Why did he choose a teaching career in his specific field (math, science, elementary education, etc.)? The teacher is also asked to begin a teaching unit and give an introductory presentation for the class. (For this item, the interviewee chooses the content area and the topic for the development of the unit.)

The WASPT has several sections, including reading comprehension, vocabulary, orthography and stress mark, and writing composition. This section serves to measure CALP. The test takes 60 minutes to complete; however,

some students take up to 90 minutes. Speed in the completion of the test is not a requirement.

Reading comprehension section

In this section, reading comprehension is measured through short passages (250–300 words) that are similar in topic and style to academic texts used in California’s public schools. Selection of these short passages was based on topics that were assumed to be familiar to the candidate, but that, in addition, had new information. A science and a social studies passage were chosen. Test takers read each of the passages and completed 10 questions for each passage. Questions require both literal and higher level thinking skills.

Vocabulary section

This section has two subsections. In the vocabulary subsection used in oral contexts, the test taker selects the appropriate expression used in instructions that are often used in the classroom. In the vocabulary subsection used in written contexts, fill-in-the-blank or “cloze procedure” items are required for the completion of an essay.

Orthography and stress marks section

This section measures knowledge of spelling rules and stress marks in Spanish. It tests proofreading and editing skills, common tasks for bilingual teachers in elementary and secondary levels.

Writing section

For this writing section, test takers have the opportunity to write in formal and informal registers. This section is intended to measure the test taker’s ability to write essays in Spanish. Candidates are given four topics/situations from which they must select two. Writing samples are used to measure the application of grammar, spelling, and accent marks, as well as the development of ideas and their organization in Spanish.

Scoring criteria

Students must be able to complete the test with 75% accuracy. Candidates have the opportunity to retake a specific section of the test (or the entire test), prior to finishing the teacher credential program. They must be finished prior to the student-teaching facet of the program.

Rubric

The development of the rubric included several tasks for researchers:

1. Review the literature on teachers’ linguistic behavior in the classroom
2. Review research of second language assessment
3. Examine ACTFL proficiency guidelines
4. Observe teacher candidates in professional settings

5. Based on the review of literature and research, develop a rubric for the bilingual teacher, focused on Spanish language (The rubric is basically an adaptation of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines)

The Spanish bilingual teacher must be able to perform the following functions:

1. Discuss academic topics in oral and written forms
2. Support opinions and hypothesize in oral and written forms
3. Communicate appropriately in familiar and unfamiliar situations
4. Narrate in oral and written forms
5. Provide explanations
6. Describe in detail
7. Interact in a conversational mode, utilizing the appropriate style and register to specific situations
8. Give presentations specific to content areas in classroom settings
9. Use language appropriate to interlocutors such as students, parents, and colleagues

The Content and Context of Communication of the Spanish Bilingual Teacher

The bilingual teacher must be able to use the Spanish language in various situations, including:

1. Use language in formal and informal styles
2. Interact with parents, students, and colleagues in Spanish in written and oral forms in the academic context
3. Use speech that is appropriate to academic and non-academic contexts

Requirements of Linguistic Accuracy for the Spanish Bilingual Teacher

The bilingual teacher must be able to demonstrate linguistic accuracy that reflects:

1. Knowledge and use of the basic structures of the Spanish language;
2. Demonstration of precise and extensive use of the Spanish language;
3. Knowledge and use of spelling and accent marks;
4. Ability to correct students' writing assignments in terms of spelling accent marks, and linguistic accuracy.

Pilot Study and Revision of the Test

Evaluation of the assessment instrument took place during the 1999–2001 academic years. Approximately 60 students took the test. Feedback from the test takers and analysis of the results provided valuable information that

helped in the revision and modification of the latest version. This feedback also indicated the need to assist students in their efforts to achieve higher levels of proficiency in Spanish. Minor format changes have been implemented.

Conclusion

In this paper, the authors present suggestions and ideas for the construct of an academic language assessment instrument. The authors hope that this article provides valuable information to similar programs in the Southwest and in other areas in the United States.

In this article, the authors underscore the need to provide adequate language testing to improve the preparation of bilingual teacher candidates. However, as suggested by Guerrero (1997), “raising the bar on language proficiency tests would simply punish” the test takers. To avoid this situation, academic language proficiency must be considered when admitting candidates seeking certification or bilingual teachers.

As stated above, the authors agree with Bachman and Palmer (1996) that tests must be designed “with specific purpose, a particular group of test takers, and a specific language use domain.” For this reason, the authors emphasize that consideration of linguistic tasks that bilingual teachers generally perform in academic settings is crucial in the design of appropriate assessment instruments. The construction of the ASPT took into consideration the factors outlined by Palmer; thus, the test focuses on communicative skills in academic interaction and on the settings the authors believe that the information gathered through the oral interview, the writing sample, and the reading sections provides the tester with an adequate measurement of linguistic proficiency.

The authors wish to restate the invaluable resource that heritage language teacher candidates represent for all the educational system in general. They recommend that teacher credential or certification programs continue acknowledging the value of the ethnic and cultural connection between teacher and students. Finally, universities need not only assess linguistic skills, but also must provide systematic and ongoing opportunities for the enhancement of language abilities.

References

- Ashcroft, K., & Palacio, D. (1996). *Researching into assessment and evaluation in colleges and universities*. New York: Kogan Page.
- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Bilingual Academic Spanish Proficiency Tests: Assessment of Bilingual Cross-Cultural and Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) Teacher Candidates. (2001). Retrieved January 10, 2002, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/demographics/reports/statewide/ethstud.htm>
- Cohen, A. (1984). *Assessing language ability in the classroom*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Colombi, M. C., & Alarcon, F. X. (1997). *La enseñanza del español a hispanohablantes: Práxis y teoría*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. San Diego, CA: College-Hill Press.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Guerrero, M. D. (1997). Spanish academic language proficiency: The case of bilingual education teachers in the U.S. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 21 (1). Retrieved May 3, 2002, from <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/mescpubs/nabe/brj/v21.htm>
- Hakuta, K., & Gutierrez, M. B. (2001). The education of language minority students. *Multilingual News*, 24 (6), 1, 10–14.
- James, C. J. (Ed.). (1985). *Foreign language proficiency in the classroom and beyond*. Chicago: National Textbook Company.
- Lowee, P. (1985). The IRL proficiency scale as a synthesizing research principle. In Charles J. James (Ed.), *Foreign language proficiency in the classroom and beyond*. Chicago: National Textbook Company.
- O' Malley, J. M., & Pierce, L. V. (1996). *Authentic assessment for English language learners*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Shrum, J. L., & Glisan, E. W. (2000). *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.
- Solomon, J., & Rhodes, N. C. (1995). *Conceptualizing academic language*. (OERI Publication No. R117G10022). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Stanfield, C. W. (2001). *An approach to performance testing of oral language proficiency for bilingual education teacher certification*. Retrieved January 10, 2002, from <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/symposia/third/stansfield.htm>