

The Arizona Home Language Survey: The Identification of Students for ELL Services

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Abstract

Assuring that English language learners (ELLs) receive the services to which they have a right requires accurately identifying those students. Virtually all states identify ELLs in a two-step process. First, parents fill out a home language survey. Second, students in whose homes a language other than English is spoken and who therefore might be less than fully proficient in English, are tested for English language proficiency. The home language survey thus plays a gatekeeping role. If it fails to identify potential ELLs, there is a greatly reduced chance these students will be identified and receive services to which they are entitled. The two studies reported in this paper are not about what services ELLs need or receive but only about the process whereby potential ELLs are identified so that they might be tested then receive services if they qualify. More specifically, it addresses the question of whether Arizona's sharp reduction in the home language survey questions can lead to failure to identify students who, by the state's own criterion (i.e., performance on the AZELLA), are entitled to those services. Analyses of data from two Arizona school districts clearly show that use of a single home language survey question will under-identify students. Based on data from these two districts, as many as 11 to 18% of students who are eligible for ELL designation could be denied services to which they are entitled if a single home language survey question is used to identify potential ELLs. Further, it is highly unlikely that a fail-safe mechanism established by the state, whereby teachers can nominate potential ELLs for language testing, will in fact successfully identify most students the new procedure fails to identify.

Introduction and Background

Federal and state laws require that students who are limited in their English proficiency, known as English language learners (ELLs), receive instructional supports and services that make classroom instruction meaningful and productive. Nearly 40 years ago, the Supreme Court ruled in the groundbreaking *Lau* decision that failure to provide these supports and services violates students' civil rights. Subsequent case law (e.g., *Castañeda*) and legislation (*No Child Left Behind*) have emphasized the need to provide services and monitor the progress of ELLs. Correctly identifying which students qualify for ELL services is therefore critical in order for schools to fulfill their legal and educational obligations.

The identification process varies across states and districts but typically involves two steps: (1) an initial referral indicating a student *might* be limited in her/his English proficiency and (2) an English proficiency test that is used to make a determination. The most common initial referral mechanism is a "Home Language Survey," a brief instrument that asks parents what language or languages are spoken in the home. The assumption is that if a language other than English is spoken in their homes, students might be limited in their English proficiency and therefore a more formal assessment of their English skills is required.

Kindler's (2002) survey nearly 10 years ago found that nearly 90% of states used a home language survey to identify ELLs. However, this report did not specify the exact role the survey played in ELL identification. A more recent report by Education Week found that 49 states are now using a home language survey, although again the report did not specify how the surveys are used in the identification process ("Identifying English-language learners," 2009). In a more limited study, Ragan and Lesaux (2006) found that 8 of 10 states with a high ELL population used a home language survey to identify children who might be ELLs. Children whose parents indicated that a language other than English was used in the home were either administered an English language proficiency test (most often), or some other means, such as teacher judgment, was used to determine whether students should be designated ELL.

Home language surveys are obviously important due to their gatekeeping function. If potential ELLs do not meet whatever threshold is set out, there is relatively little chance they will be identified for ELL services. Home language surveys are brief, typically 3 or 4 questions, and usually inquire about the language a child first learned to speak, the language he or she speaks most frequently at home, and the language spoken by others in the home. Home language surveys have been the subject of criticism, particularly since we have no data as to their reliability, validity, or the relationship between parents' responses and students' measured English proficiency (Abedi, 2008). Critics argue that home language surveys can over-identify students as ELLs who in fact are not, since the use of a language other than English at home does not necessarily indicate that a student will be limited in English proficiency (Littlejohn, 1998). As reported in Education Week:

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A growing chorus of people [is] saying that some school districts are overzealous in categorizing students as English-language learners... They contend that the information requested on the home-language survey ... can be misleading or misused. (Zehr, 2010, p. 1)

Changes in Arizona's Home Language Survey and the Present Study

Recently, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) changed its home language survey (referred to as the Primary Home Language Other Than English, or "PHLOTE," survey) for identifying potential ELLs (Kossan, 2009). Prior to July 1, 2009, the PHLOTE survey asked three questions¹:

1. What is the primary language used in the home regardless of the language spoken by the student?
2. What is the language most often spoken by the student?
3. What is the language that the student first acquired?

If parents answered a language other than English to any of the three questions, children were tested, using the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment, or AZELLA², to determine whether they qualified for ELL services.

As of July 1, 2009, Arizona districts no longer ask about the home language; they are to use only one question: "What is the primary language of the student?" A student is tested for English proficiency if the parent responds to this question with a language other than English. If a parent answers that a student's primary language is "English," schools do not test students for language proficiency, and the student is placed into a mainstream classroom. In other words, whereas previously if a parent answered with a language other than English for any of three questions about the child's language and language in the home, the student was eligible for testing and possible ELL identification. Now, the only question that matters is what the parent reports as the student's "primary language."

ADE officials and others defend this change in the screening procedure, arguing that what is most relevant for identifying possible ELLs is the language the student him or herself mostly uses, not the child's first language or the language of the household. Moreover, they offer that Arizona law allows for a safety net: Teachers who think any of their students might need ELL services, but have been overlooked by the system, can nominate those students for language proficiency assessment; if students qualify, they will then become eligible for ELL services.

¹ Home language surveys are administered by school districts, and there is some variation in how they are administered and the order and wording of items. Essentially, however these 3 questions comprised the home language surveys in Arizona districts prior to July 1, 2009.

² Prior to 2006, Arizona used the Stanford English Language Proficiency (SELP) Test.

Opponents of the change argue that various factors influence students' language proficiency such as the language most often used in the home by other household members. Limiting the screening process to a single question, critics argue, runs the risk of failing to identify students who might need the ELL support and services required by law (Kossan, 2009; Zehr, 2010). They further question whether ADE's alleged fail safe mechanism, whereby teachers can nominate for language testing students who were not identified by the one-question PHLOTE, will identify all, or even most, ELLs who are not identified under the new screening procedure using a single question.

The question we address in this paper goes to the heart of the controversy over the role of the home language survey in identifying possible ELLs: Can screening for possible ELL classification based on a single question underestimate the number of students eligible for ELL services?³ We further ask whether underestimation is meaningfully mitigated when there is a fail safe mechanism in place, such that teachers can nominate ELLs not identified by the new, more limited, screening procedure.

Procedures

Data come from two metropolitan Arizona districts. District A is a medium-size district, one of the largest in the state. Over 10% of the student population is ELL. It is a "minority-majority district," with 29.0% European American, 7.5 African American, 56.0 Latino American, 4.5 Native American, and 3.0 Asian American. District B is an elementary school district and has less than half the enrollment of District A. District B is 90% Latino American; nearly one-third of students are ELLs.

Since the students and procedures varied somewhat, we report data and analyses from each district as separate studies.

Study 1. Students in Study 1 were all in grades K-5 and enrolled in District A during the 2009-2010 school year, but they had first enrolled in the district prior to July 1, 2009. These students fell under the former ELL identification protocol. Therefore if parents indicated a language other than English in response to any of the three home language survey questions, the students were tested to determine eligibility for ELL services.

The analytic strategy for Study 1 was as follows:

1. Determine how many students tested prior to July 1, 2009, were found to be eligible for ELL services based on the former protocol, i.e., if parents answered a language other than English on any of the 3 home language survey items, students were tested; if students scored less than "proficient" they were eligible for ELL services.

³ Students who scored less than proficient on the AZELLA are *eligible* for ELL services, but they do not necessarily receive them since a small number of parents choose not to have their children receive ELL services.

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2. Determine how many of these students *would have been found eligible for ELL services had the current protocol been in place at the time*. The new protocol, adopted by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) as of July 1, 2009, only assesses students whose parents answered yes to one question: *What is the primary language of the student?* Although not identical, this question is very similar to question 2 in the former home language survey: *What language does this student speak most often at home?* We therefore assumed that students enrolled prior to July 1, 2009, whose parents answered "English" to question 2 would not have been tested for English language proficiency had the current protocol been in place.

The difference between these two figures--(1) how many students tested prior to July 1, 2009, were found eligible for ELL services based on the former protocol and (2) how many of these students would have been found eligible for ELL services had the current protocol been in place at the time--is then an estimate of the degree to which the current ADE screening and assessment protocol is likely to under-identify students eligible for ELL services.

In addition, we had retesting data since ELLs are retested every year. We were therefore able to determine how many students who would have been missed if the current protocol been in place were *still* considered ELLs upon retesting one or more years later.

Study 2. Students in District B were enrolled in kindergarten during the 2009-10 school year. Since the district offers incoming kindergartners the option of pre-registering, approximately half of these students had registered before July 1, 2009. Students who registered before the July 1 deadline were subject to the former ELL identification protocol. That is, if their parents indicated a language other than English in response to any of the three home language survey questions, students were assessed for English language proficiency. Those students who registered after the July deadline were subject to the current ELL identification protocol, which asked only the one question ("What is the primary language of the student?").

The analytic strategy for Study 2 was similar to that of Study 1: Determine how many students who enrolled and were tested prior to July 1, 2009, were found to require ELL services based on the former protocol then determine how many of these students *would have been missed had the current protocol been in place at the time*. Unlike Study 1, however, since all of the students in Study 2 were kindergartners in 2009-2010, no re-test scores were reported nor analyzed.

Findings

Study 1. Table 1 reports the number of students in District A attending grades K-5 in 2009-10 who had enrolled prior to July 1, 2009 and were tested for language proficiency because parents indicated that a language other than English was used in the home. (A small number of kindergarten students had enrolled prior to July 1, 2009 and were retained in kindergarten for 2009-2010.) These students enrolled under the former

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protocol, so students whose parents answered a language other than English ('O') for any of the three Home Language Survey questions were assessed for English proficiency. Table 1 shows the different patterns of responses given by parents, with 'E' indicating English and 'O' indicating a language other than English. For example, 'EOE' (first column) indicates the parent answered English for question 1, a language other than English for question 2, and English for question 3 (see table for wording of questions).

Table 1. Students in District A enrolled prior to July 1, 2009 who would and would not have been assessed for language proficiency under current ADE testing protocol, by current grade*

Parents' Home Language Survey responses when student first enrolled

Current grade	Would have been assessed in current protocol				Would not have been assessed in current protocol			TOTAL
	EOE	EOO	OOE	OOO	EEO	OEE	OEO	
K	0	0	3	13	1	1	3	21
1	6	9	49	803	99	72	88	1126
2	10	9	39	865	93	91	109	1216
3	7	7	52	875	100	84	128	1253
4	12	16	57	895	112	100	122	1314
5	8	15	66	878	125	80	132	1304
TOTAL	43	56	266	4329	530	428	582	6234
Total who...	would have been assessed			4694	would not have been assessed		1540	

* 26 students were excluded because their home language survey results had missing data.

E/O indicates parent response to each question:

1. What is the language that the student first acquired?
2. What is the language most often spoken by the student?
3. What is the primary language used in the home regardless of the language spoken by the student?

Table 1 also shows which students *would have been assessed* and which students *would not have been assessed* if the current testing protocol had been in place when the students first enrolled. Under the current protocol, only students whose parents answer 'O' to the equivalent of question 2 (the primary language of the student) are tested. No other questions are asked. We therefore divided parents' responses into two categories: Those that would trigger initial assessment under the current protocol and those that would not. Four patterns of responses would trigger initial assessment in the current protocol: EOE, EOO, OOE, and OOO. In each pattern, parent response to question 2 indicates that the child most often speaks a language other than English. Three other patterns--EEO, OEE, OEO--indicate that the main language used by the child is English

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(question 2 = 'E') and therefore would not trigger testing. As Table 1 shows, of the total 6234 students enrolled in 2009-10 who began in the district before July 1, 2009 and whose parents indicated a language other than English was used in the home, 1540 would not have been assessed under the current protocol (second-to-last column, Table 1), since their parents' response to question 2--the language the child spoke most often--was "English."

Table 2 reports the results of the language assessments for the 6234 total students who were assessed and, more critically, the 1540 students (of the 6234 total) who would not have been assessed had the current assessment protocol been in place when they enrolled. Table 2 shows that of these 1540 students who would *not* have been assessed, 1107 (72%) in fact tested as less than proficient in English and therefore eligible for ELL services. These students would not have been identified as eligible for ELL services had the current testing protocol been in place when they first enrolled. Moreover, as shown in column 5, nearly half of the 1107 still qualified for ELL services when retested in subsequent years (ELLs are tested yearly).

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Table 2. Students attending grades K-5 in 2009-10 enrolled prior to 2009-10 school year and identified as eligible for ELL services when first enrolled*

	1. # of students whose parents responded on the HLS that a language other than English was used in the home and were therefore tested for language proficiency ¹	2. # of students determined eligible for ELL services when tested	3. # of students whose parents indicated English is the language used most often by the student and therefore, under current testing protocol, student would not have been eligible for testing and initial ELL designation.	4. # of students in col. 3 who were less than proficient when tested (i.e. eligible for ELL services). These are the students who were ELL but would have been missed had current protocol been in place.	5. # of ELLs who would have been missed under current protocol (col. 4) and who remained ELL even when re-tested subsequently
K	21	21	5	5	4 ²
Gr 1	1126	1067	259	227	122 ³
Gr 2	1216	1145	293	259	159 ⁴
Gr 3	1253	1160	312	268	106 ⁵
Gr 4	1314	1008	334	186	65 ⁶
Gr 5	1304	869	337	162	47
TOTAL	6234	5270	1540	1107	503

* 26 students were excluded because their home language survey results had missing data.

¹ Parents answered "other" on at least 1 home language survey question.

² although 5 in this cohort scored less than proficient on the initial test, only 4 re-test scores were recorded.

³ although 227 in this cohort scored less than proficient on the initial test, only 219 re-test scores were recorded.

⁴ although 259 in this cohort scored less than proficient on the initial test, only 249 re-test scores were recorded.

⁵ although 268 in this cohort scored less than proficient on the initial test, only 263 re-test scores were recorded.

⁶ although 186 in this cohort scored less than proficient on the initial test, only 183 re-test scores were recorded.

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Study 2. Table 3 shows the number of kindergarten students in District B who enrolled prior to July 1, 2009. As with the students in District A, since these students enrolled under the former testing protocol, they were assessed if parents reported a language other than English spoken in the house. However, had the current protocol been in place, 88 of these students would not have been assessed, since parents reported that English was the language the student used most often. Of these 88 children, 86 were eligible for ELL services (see Table 4). The other two might have been as well; however their language proficiency scores were not recorded.

Table 3. Kindergarten students in District B enrolled prior to July 1, 2009 who would and would not have been assessed for language proficiency under current ADE testing protocol *

Parents' Home Language Survey responses when student first enrolled

	Would have been assessed in current protocol				Would not have been assessed in current protocol			TOTAL
	EOE	EOO	OOE	OOO	EEO	OEE	OEO	
# of students	3	12	6	675	14	13	61	784
Total who...	would have been assessed				696	would not have been assessed		88

* Students with missing home data (n=11) and with both pre- and post- July 1, 2009 data (n=16) excluded

Table 4. Students Kindergarten in District 2 in 2009-10, enrolled prior to July 1, 2009, and identified as needing ELL services when first enrolled*

	1. # of students whose parents responded on the HLS that a language other than English was used in the home and were therefore tested for language proficiency ¹	2. # of students determined eligible for ELL services when tested	3. # of students whose parents indicated English is the language used most often by the student and therefore, under current testing protocol, student would not have been eligible for testing and initial ELL designation.	4. # of students in col. 3 who were less than proficient when tested (i.e. eligible for ELL services). These are the students who were ELL but would have been missed had current protocol been in place.
# of Students	784	778 ²	88	86 ³

* Students with missing home language data (n=11) and with both pre- and post- July 1, 2009 data (n=16) excluded

¹ Parents answered "other" on at least 1 home language survey question.

² although the parents of 784 students reported that a language other than English was used in the home, only 779 assessment scores were recorded.

³ 2 students' assessment scores were not recorded.

The "fail safe" mechanism. The Arizona Department of Education attempted to ascertain to what extent the teacher nomination protocol (the "fail safe") was able to identify potential ELLs who were overlooked by the new PHLOTE survey. One hundred-thirty (130) districts and charters with large numbers of ELLs responding to an ADE inquiry in the 2009-10 school year reported that 96 students had been nominated for assessment with 94 qualifying for services.⁴ Based on data from the districts in the two studies reported in this paper, it is highly unlikely that there are only 94 additional ELLs throughout the state who were (a) not identified by the one-question PHLOTE and (b) would qualify for ELL services if they were tested for language proficiency. Table 2 shows that in a single district there were 1107 students who were in fact ELL but who would not have been assessed had the current PHLOTE protocol been in place. In the second district, shown in Table 4, in kindergarten alone there were 86 students identified as ELL but who would not have been identified had they enrolled under the current PHLOTE protocol. The 96 nominated students revealed by the ADE survey represent a

⁴ Arizona Department of Education memo from Marlene Johnston to Jackie Jones, regarding PHLOTE Study summary, dated May 25, 2010.

very small fraction of the total number of potential ELLs who likely should be assessed for possible ELL services.

Conclusion

Results of both studies are very clear: By excluding from English proficiency testing students whose parents answer English as the language the student speaks most often, limited English proficient students are certain to be under-identified. As a result, students who are likely to need ELL services will not receive them. In District A, this would have amounted to over 1100 students out of a total 6234 in whose homes a language other than English was spoken. In other words, nearly 18% of eligible students would have failed to receive ELL service. In District B, at least 86 students--11% of kindergartners whose parents reported a language other than English spoken in the home--would not have been identified as ELLs--and therefore would not have received ELL services--if the current protocol had been in place when they registered for school. Moreover, given the numbers of students who are under-identified, it is virtually impossible that the state's fail safe system of teacher nomination could reach the majority, or even a significant number, of these students. By the state's own criterion, i.e., language proficiency according to the AZELLA, students in need of ELL services will not receive them if students are identified for language testing on the basis of a single question asking only about the student's primary language. The two studies reported here suggest that as many as 11 to 18% of students eligible for ELL services (minus a small number nominated by teachers for testing) could remain unidentified and therefore fail to receive services to which they are entitled.

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