Navigating English Learner Standards

John Carr explains how WestEd's Map of Standards for English Learners not only clarifies California's standards, but can be used to improve the instruction and assessment of English learners in any classroom setting

California created English Language Development (ELD) standards about nine years ago as "the on-ramp" for English learners to access and eventually reach proficiency on the English-Language Arts (ELA) standards. It was a pioneering effort in the nation and became a model for other states to follow. In July 1999, the California Department of Education published the ELD standards in print and online. Teachers soon discovered that the ELD standards tended to be more specific and easier to understand when compared to the ELA standards, but the ELD standards were not organized in a teacher-friendly format for designing lesson plans and assessing student progress. For instance, standards at the Beginning level for all skills related to the strand of reading comprehension appeared on a few pages, followed by those for Early Intermediate, and so on.

Suppose you were a fourth grade teacher back then, and you wanted to teach the ELA and ELD standards associated with the skill of "describing the main ideas of a story" to a class of English Only and English learners at the five ELD levels. It was tedious to search for that particular ELD standard among many others throughout many pages covering five ELD levels. Then came the hunt for the corresponding ELA standard in another document. Then there were other important skills, or standards, the teacher wanted to plan in the lesson. It was no wonder many teachers gave up trying to plan truly standards-based lessons for their English learners.

In 2000, WestEd published The Map of Standards for English Learners as a unifying resource for teachers to plan lessons that integrated ELA and ELD standards and assess English learners' proficiency levels. Word spread quickly among educators in the state that the Map was extremely teacher-friendly. The premise was that a teacher should be able to see at a glance the ELD standards that target a specific skill from Beginning to Advanced levels as rows in one column, and then look to the right and see the matching ELA standards in three columns for the grade span (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, or 9-12). The standards across ELD levels that addressed a specific skill were called an ELD cluster. The

Map addressed the problem teachers faced when they tried to use the state standards for lesson planning - it took them hours of tedious searching through many pages of the state standards to form each ELD cluster and matching ELA standards..

Next, WestEd developed a workshop to assist teachers and teacher-leaders in understanding how to navigate through ELD clusters in the Map, plan an integrated lesson, and use the ELD clusters like rubrics to assess student achievement. Over the years, workshop participants gave many suggestions on how to improve the product which led to successive editions including the updated and final fifth edition of the Map (Carr and Lagunoff, 2006)

Stepping Stones in a Sea of Standards

The fifth edition goes beyond the mapping of the ELD and ELA standards by each skill within language arts strands. Now, each ELD cluster has a label, a "big idea," that, in a few words, reflects the core skill for all ELD levels and matching ELA standards. These big ideas are like stepping stones across a sea of standards. They are the keys to finding similar, or otherwise cohesive, skills (standards) across domains of listening/speaking, reading, and writing and planning a tightly focused lesson.

There are literally hundreds of ELD and ELA standards. It is untenable to expect a teacher to teach each standard with equal importance, given the sheer number and realization that students are expected to also learn numerous standards in mathematics, science, social science, and so on. The Map identifies "essential" standards, roughly 15 ELA standards per grade level that are more heavily measured by the California ELA Standards Test (aka STAR test). Teachers respond that 15 standards form a "doable" set of the most important standards and they like the fact that this set covers over half of the STAR test (based on the 2005 STAR blueprints). When an ELA standard is designated as an essential standard (symbolized by ES), then the matching cluster of ELD standards also is designated ES. Many teachers wonder which ELD standards are measured by the CELDT (California's test for English

learners). These standards are identified in the Map.

To assist teachers in planning lessons, the ELD clusters are organized within a strand, as far as possible, according to the logical order in which they are taught, and similar ELD clusters are placed adjacent. The ELD clusters in each strand of each domain follow the same ordering so, if a skill is the first cluster in one strand, a very similar skill will be the first cluster in another strand. For example, the ELD cluster labeled "Follows Directions" is the first ELD cluster in Listening/Speaking domain and Reading Comprehension strand.

The Map as an Assessment Tool

In our Map workshops, teachers are asked, "What do these ELD clusters remind you of when you think about what you use to assess student performance, such as a written composition?" They respond that the ELD clusters look like rubrics. As rubrics, the Map can be used by teachers to judge the achievement level of English learners with respect to specific skills at any point in time during the school year. The state's CELDT serves a purpose and does it well, but it was not meant to be a diagnostic assessment, or to provide fresh data.

For example, in one ELD cluster in the reading comprehension strand, the Beginning English learner can identify the main ideas of a story using words or phrases while the Early Intermediate student can identify the main ideas using simple sentences. The Intermediate level is more difficult, requiring the student to explain the main ideas and details. Early Advanced and Advanced students also must explain the main ideas and support with critical details. (If the text is grade appropriate, the student is Advanced; if the readability of the text is of a lower level, the student is Early Advanced.)

However, when workshop participants are asked to judge an English Learner's performance according to one ELD cluster, their judgments are usually spread across three or more ELD levels, and often higher than the student's true level. Granted, the student sample (a book report) was chosen to be difficult to score and so encourage debate

and critical thinking. For teachers to be the best assessors of a student, they need to be fairly accurate and consistent so that any two teachers judging the same student performance will say it represents the same ELD level. Frequent collaboration among teachers regarding standards, expectations, instruction, assessment strategies, and student results can foster consistency and elevate classroom assessment as the most current, accurate, specific information about a student's level of achievement.

From Assessing to Reporting Grades

Suppose a teacher is using the Map to plan differentiated lessons and assessment, what happens when it is time to report achievement and progress — what should the report cards reflect? No teacher wants to report a grade of "D" or "F" for English language arts because the student is at the Beginning ELD level. A grade such as "C*" conveys nothing about what the student has learned. Standards-based reporting systems that use 1-4 or 1-5 scales make it appear less disconcerting to give the English learners "1's" but again, what does this convey about what the English learner does know? Letter or number grades reflecting English-language arts standards are not appropriate until the English learner has attained "reasonable fluency." Achievement for the English learner needs to reflect the ELD standards.

The fifth edition of the Map includes an ELD Student Report to be used as a supplement to the traditional report card. The report is a one-sided form in Word format. The template presents essential ELD skill clusters and also some nonessential but still important skill clusters, showing just cluster labels. To the right of the cluster labels are five columns for the five ELD levels. This is where a teacher enters data about student performance. The teacher enters the grading period and year (e.g., Q1/08 indicates first quarter of 2008) when a student has mastered an ELD level. As long as the teacher has been using the Map to assess students throughout the grading period, it is easy to report achievement on the ELD Student Report. The form can be downloaded