Advancing ALTELLA Kickoff
Question and Answer Session on
Universal Design and Accessibility

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1. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your expertise.

I work as Director of Student Supports at the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium housed at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I work with Smarter Balanced co-directors, senior leadership, and Consortium governing members to sustain and enhance the assessment system to improve outcomes for diverse students, including English learners, students with disabilities, and English learners with disabilities. I also provide support to Smarter Balanced work groups, advisory committees, advocacy groups, and assessment experts to improve assessments for diverse learners.

I received my Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Administration from the University of Minnesota, with a Comparative and International Development Education major and Program Evaluation minor. My research and policy priorities entail providing leadership and ongoing oversight and management of effective and equitable supports for all students. My experience of providing technical assistance to states and assessment consortia has helped me with a solid foundation in the area of inclusive assessment.

2. How do you think that universal design should be incorporated into assessment development?

I think universal design needs to be incorporated meaningfully and consistently throughout the assessment development and administration cycles. One of its core principles is inclusivity of diverse populations and thinking about as many populations as possible from inception. If we are providing translation supports for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, it is likely that other English learners in the classroom or students interested in other languages and cultures will benefit from those supports as well. Another important principle is staying true to the assessment standards without lowering them or compromising them otherwise. I think this principle is a safeguard for this student population because it keeps us on track with maintaining high standards for all students. Maximally accessible and bias-free assessment content is another foundational principle of universal design for assessment. For this principle, I like to use the window-mirror metaphor: the item or stimulus should provide sufficient information through its window for the student to be able to mirror it back and respond to the item meaningfully. If biases or assumptions are present in the item, that window will be all fogged up or even covered with frost, which will consequently be reflected in the student's

response. Universal design for assessment is also all about comprehensibility and legibility—content needs to be age- and grade-appropriate and authentic, instructions and directions need to be clear, since we are not assessing the student's knowledge of them, and formatting should not interfere with the student's comprehension. When it comes to this principle, we also need be attentive to linguistic complexity—Gary Cook and Rita MacDonald have done a lot of work in this area. Finally, as overarching as universal design for assessment is, it does not account for accommodations, and we have to remember that students will need such supports as assistive technology, American Sign Language, braille, scribing, etc., and assessments should be responsive to those.

3. **Where is the line between universal design and standardized tests? Can universal design go too far and risk the standardization of the assessment?**

I am not aware of such a line actually. Since construct integrity is foundational in universal design, it is meant to support standardization—well—by design. I can see the opposite effect when universal design for assessment principles are not followed, and the content favors only a particular student group, or test directions are overly complex—those instances would be associated with some risks.

4. How do we maintain the focus on language acquisition within the broader focus on access and universal design?

I think universal design is well-positioned to support various educational dimensions, including language acquisition. It allows for additional flexibility compared to more rigid educational environments. This is often essential for those students who are not only processing the content but are also acquiring the language. It allows for multiple means of representation and multiple response modes, which is particularly important for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities who are navigating multiple linguocultural contexts as well as overcoming cognitive barriers.

We currently have multiple tiers of accessibility resources at our disposal, and educators need to understand which resources are most appropriate for each student at each English language proficiency level. Such universal tier resources as providing additional time and offering breaks are almost a given for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, but when we get into the designated tier of resources and need to consider to what extent we support these students with translation or interpretation resources (such as translated glossaries or translated test directions)—this is where knowing what the student needs and prefers to use becomes more important.

5. Is flexibility a threat to validly assessing the construct? Current items might be more about adaptive behavior and less about sociolinguistic contexts of language.

In general, if construct integrity is not compromised, flexibility should not be perceived as a threat. If, of course, we are talking about modifying or lowering the construct, then that degree of flexibility will have negative consequences. I also think that certain items, particularly performance tasks, can probably tease out the sociolinguistic nature of students' responses.

6. The more we introduce accessibility, it seems we risk moving away from what the intent for the assessment may be. How do we avoid this movement or shift and maintain accessibility?

I am not sure I agree with this statement. Accessibility is an equity issue, a human right. It is not about providing an advantage, it is about removing disadvantages. I think we have been seeing a different kind of shift in the field—from using accommodations based on blanketed decisions for groups of students primarily in the area of special education to using accessibility resources (that include accommodations) grounded in individualized decisions and responsive to students' unique needs and preferences—not only students with disabilities, but also English learners, English learners with disabilities, and other general education students. We do need more implementation resources to support teachers, students, and families with information and processes related to accessibility, and this is, in part, caused by this shift in the past decade.

If the question is about over-assigning accessibility resources, then there is still some work to do in that area as well as some research to conduct, and we need to hear more success stories about providing appropriate accessibility resources for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities in school, home, and hybrid contexts.

7. This group's comparison group is never-English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. How do we ensure that English learners with significant cognitive disabilities have the same language skills development as non-English learners with significant cognitive disabilities?

Is this the only comparison group for this student category? Depending on where students are with their language- and disability-related needs, they can probably also be compared to English learners as well as other general education students. And, of course, accessibility is only one ingredient to ensuring that English learners with significant cognitive disabilities successfully advance on their paths to college, career, and community readiness, but it certainly is an important ingredient because it makes us think not only about *what* we are assessing but about *how* we are assessing it.

8. How do we ensure that our English learners with significant cognitive disabilities are not continuing in services because of an impact of their disabilities?

I think communication is crucial here. We are responsible for identifying optimal ways of establishing and maintaining meaningful communication with the student while using appropriate resources. There are documented cases confirming that the right communication mode, the appropriate assistive technology support, and inclusive practices significantly improve performance of students with significant cognitive disabilities, and some might even help with identifying them as English learners. It might take some time to figure out what works best for each student, but it will certainly be beneficial overall.

9. How do we look at growth and exiting with regard to language development and identifying where students are in alignment with never-English learner peers with significant cognitive disabilities? What are some things we need to be looking at from the beginning to ensure positive momentum and direction?

This sounds to me like the mission of the ALTELLA project. I think one of the tools that might be helpful is the language- and disability-needs four-quadrant framework—the brief on this framework describes how to track students' progress over time and how to use corresponding resources. It is important to evaluate the use of accessibility resources in instruction and on assessments throughout the year. Some resources, such as translations, may become less needed as the student's English language proficiency increases. Other resources related to some disabilities may be needed continuously. But it is my hope that this project will continue working on comprehensive assessment tools that will help educators with identification and exiting of these students.

10. What are approaches or item types that would be appropriate in each domain (reading, writing, speaking, listening) for our students experiencing deafness, blindness, or other disabilities?

In assessment, we sometimes like to follow the principle "the more technology, the better." However, some item types have proven to be challenging for some student populations. For instance, some technologically enhanced items are not considered fully accessible because they do not render correctly on most assistive technology devices. Some drag-and-drop items may be challenging for students with certain physical disabilities. Those complex items can often be replaced with simpler and more accessible item types, and the construct will remain the same. For English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, assessment content needs to be responsive to various means of expression—through speech-to-text, braille, assistive technology, etc.

Special attention should also be paid to bias and sensitivity issues. Items that say such things as "lucky enough to see," "listening to music is the best way to relax," "research shows that running improves math scores," probably should be excluded due to their ableist nature.

11. What are the common failures/assumptions people make with regard to developing an assessment? What do people get wrong?

I think one of the misperceptions is that items are quick and easy to create. If developed properly, each item goes through multiple stages of editing, internal and external reviews (both content and bias and sensitivity ones), addition of various accessibility resources, field testing—all this work occurs before students are able to respond to the item to demonstrate what they know and can do.

From the accessibility perspective, some of the challenges have been related to disconnects between instruction and assessment. Students will not be able to benefit from an accessibility resource on the test if they see that resource for the first time when they sit down to take the very test. Ideally, the same or comparable resources need to be used in the classroom or at least experienced on practice tests.

I also want to come back to the issue of over-assigning, under-assigning, or mis-assigning accessibility resources. It is sometimes tempting to check all the resources on the menu so that the student has as many supports as possible. But many does not always mean better. Many might result in an increase of a cognitive load for the student, and this is particularly crucial to keep in mind if the student has a cognitive disability. The same is true for not providing sufficient accessibility resources or incorrect ones. It is essential that those decisions be made in collaboration among those educators who know students well, students themselves, and students' families.

12. Any other comments or thoughts that were not covered?

The area of accessibility continues to offer new (often technology-based) solutions that improve educational experiences for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. We need to keep an eye on those innovations and be open to them if they are optimal for our students. Learning about new tools might seem time consuming at the beginning, but it will certainly be beneficial in the long run.

Also, given the richness of diversity among English learners with significant cognitive disabilities, I hope this project keeps its focus on the social-emotional aspect of student assessment and promotes content that is representative of various cultures (including ethnicities, races, genders, disabilities, and other cultural dimensions) and is truly authentic and relatable for this student population.

Other Helpful Resources

Accessibility Strategies for Remote Teaching and Learning:
http://portal.smarterbalanced.org/library/en/accessibility-strategies-for-remote-teaching-and-learning.pdf

Cawthon, S. & Shyyan, V. V. (2020). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Education: Accessibility and Accommodations on Large Scale Assessments.*

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