

## **Advancing ALTELLA Kickoff**

### **Question and Answer Session on**

### **Multilingual Learners who are Blind/Visually Impaired**

**Sheri Wells-Jensen**  
Associate Professor, Bowling Green State University

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

I'm a linguist by training and I've branched out from there since, but I began wanting desperately to teach English as a second language because when I was in the Peace Corps, the language teachers we had were mind-meltingly brilliant. I loved them so much, and they made the classes so much fun. So I wanted to do that; I wanted to be them. Then, when I got to grad school, I also found out that you could do science and language at the same time. That's how I fell in love with linguistics. And then I got tenure, and that meant I could branch out and do some other things. Pre-tenure I tried to have an ambiguous disability web presence. So people would read my stuff online and think "Is she blind? Is she not? I don't know, but she seems to read braille." Politically, socially, and in academia, it felt safer to me to keep it ambiguous. And then I got tenure, and all the ambiguity went away. And then I started picking up disability studies because it's something that we strongly need in the world. Language teaching is important, but I realized there's other stuff I could do.

#### **2. What does reading look like for multilingual learners who are blind/visually impaired? How does it mesh with or not with language acquisition definitions and practices?**

So, if you're going for the whole hamburger of blind and visually impaired, that's a whole spectrum of things from "I could drive a car if I'm careful" all the way down to "I don't know if the lights are on in this room." One solution can not fit all of those people. At one end of the continuum, you need to worry about things like contrastive colors and print size. On the other end, you have braille. So, the medium has to be decided first. It makes most sense to give a kid a medium where they're not straining and can be comfortable. Whereas the default assumption might be that the kid should read print if at all possible. That's probably making a good subset of those kids struggle, where they struggle to read print, it hurts their heads, and they're slow - and they could be reading braille and be much more relaxed. So the fit of the medium is delicate, important, and it requires us to let go of our idea that reading print is always better. What's always better is the comfort, gracefulness, and naturalness of the feel to the student herself. It doesn't matter what we think; it matters how the student feels.

And then there's the "is listening reading?" question. Because we specifically have a listening section on these tests, this gets a little complicated. Listening to conversation is a different beast than listening to a book. The rhetoric is organized differently. My participation in

a conversation with whoever is standing there will have a lot more feedback and interaction. So, my hypothesis testing is going on all the time, and I'm reinforced for getting it right and guided when I get it wrong in conversation. If I'm just pulling out my book and being read to from the book, there's a lot of discourse that goes by without any opportunity for me to interact and confirm that I'm understanding. If you're asking me "Did you read that book about evolution technology?" I would say yes. And I listen to it on my phone; my fingers touch no words, but the information is read from that author's head into my head.

However, when you're proficiency testing, if you want to talk about a reading score, then we should probably be talking about reading because it is a different cognitive process. There's a score set aside for it. I am inclined to say that reading is reading, and reading is not listening for the purposes of language evaluation. It's always important and useful to be able to read. One of the things that we do when we decide "oh, they'll just listen" is we are denying that student all the advantages of reading, and I don't mean the advantages of sitting on the beach with a book. I mean the advantages of writing a shopping list, writing a note to a family member, or reading a stop sign. It's a life skill. It's important to be able to read your own stuff, especially as a blind person. There's so much stuff in print in the world that I can't read. I love my little braille labels. They're everywhere. The ability to write and read even at the level of "which cheese is this?" Children have a right to read. It is in their cognitive ability, and we have a responsibility to offer that to them.

### **3. How should we consider English language acquisition coupled with braille skill development in a reading domain of an English language proficiency assessment?**

It is a different kind of training to learn to read tactically than it is to learn to look at things and absorb the written word visually. It's a different system and the tactile system needs more time, attention, and care than the visual system does. Again though, let's look at what we are offering the kid. If you are a visual reader, you see print around you all day long. If you look around where you are sitting right now, you probably see dozens of things written. There is print on everything, even people's clothing. If you are a braille reader, your casual exposure to braille is quite limited. The amount of time you spend reinforcing and practicing is severely limited. If I'm looking around my office right now, I have a couple of braille books on my shelf, there is some braille that I have written on my desk, and I have access via braille to stuff on my computer. All of those things are things that I have put there except for the stuff on my computer. When I go out into the world, there is precious little braille. So, if this is a race, the braille reading kids are starting behind, not because braille is a problem, but because we don't arrange the environment to give them equal access. If you take a kid who should be reading braille, even just in class with the other kids, the braille teacher might take the child out of the class for 45 minutes and bring him back in. That was his braille for the day; that was his reading instruction for the day. The reading instruction for other kids starts when they first wake up in the morning and stops when they're in bed at night. There's so much casual exposure to print.

So, let's equalize this a little bit; the kid deserves more access so that he can learn to read. Now, testing is pretty high stakes sometimes and it matters, but that's the way the kid reads. So, yes you are testing braille when you put it in front of the kid, but you are also testing print when you put print test in front of the kid. So, what are we teaching and how do we make it fair? How do we give the kid what he deserves? You have the listening portion of the test— that's for listening. You have the reading portion of the test—that's for reading. The kid has a right to learn to read, and if he's not being taught braille, that's a finding and something we should know. Is it fair to give a kid a braille test when he can't read braille? Well, it is an accurate assessment of his state of being able to read. If he needs braille, then he needs braille.

#### **4. What role, if any, should listening play in the reading domain of an English language proficiency assessment?**

I think the role of listening is in giving instructions. If you've got a sighted kid, you can point to the text and tell the kid to read, and the words you say don't matter because you've gestured appropriately. If you're telling a blind kid to read, you've used their listening skills. So, the instructional part is important. You're going to replace what you would normally do with gesture and pointing with words. That's relevant to all of these tests: do they understand the instructions? The stuff that we do as English teachers—there's a lot of jumping around and waving our hands and pointing at things that are nonverbal that the blind kid doesn't have the same access to. Some of what we're going to get is not an accurate representation of their abilities because they didn't understand what we were trying to make them do in the first place. So, it's not exactly what the question is asking, but I think that's an important piece.

#### **5. What are recommended structures or approaches for this area for students who have not yet begun learning Braille or have not mastered braille reading? Are there other ways students develop reading skills?**

No. Teach them braille. It is their right to learn to read. The history of tactile reading is fascinating. People have tried all kinds of different wild things. There were different embossed systems that were used in the 1930s. There were systems of raised lines of print letters. There were political reasons why braille won out in the end, but some of them were just not workable. So, we are not going to be in the process of reinventing tactile reading. That's a bad place to go. We have a perfect workable system. Sometimes there's jumbo braille, which puts the lines further apart. Sometimes that's useful for people, like folks with neuropathy. So they don't feel like their sense of touch is not as acute. If the goal is specifically so that the student can label things and read short words, then jumbo braille could be appropriate. But that's the furthest we're going with messing with braille.

## **6. What are the common failures/assumptions with regard to developing assessments for multilingual learners who are blind/visually impaired? What do people get wrong?**

What you're really asking is what do people get wrong about blindness, which is culturally fraught. What pictures come into your mind when you think about blind people? Are they an amazing attorney? Are they the CEO? Are they the athlete? Are they the parent of six kids who's doing a great job? Are they professors, teachers, and civil leaders? No! When people think about blind people, they think that they're something akin to a Barbie doll that you stand around and don't want to play with very much because you don't want to mess up its dress. The culture sets us up to get everything wrong about blindness because it is a pretty low-incidence disability, and we're scared of blindness. The idea of going blind is way up on the list of terrible things that can happen to a person.

So, what we get wrong about blindness is that we react to it out of our sense of fear. We use and trust cultural depictions of blindness that are traitorously bad. So we don't think of this from the perspective of "Oh, okay - I can't see that. How am I going to get that done?" That's the question we should be asking: "Oh, I can't see that. How do I make that accessible?" So we think of blindness as this holistic catastrophe that changes everything about you in ways that you don't explore because it's too big and scary. Blindness is simply a lack of information. The things that blind people cannot do have to do with not knowing stuff that's out there. If you think of it as a lack of information, it becomes first off less terrifying and it becomes a problem to solve, not a horrible living situation that needs all sorts of addressing. Information is something we all understand. We have to couple that with the understanding that our modern society is arranged for the convenience of people who see and get their information visually. So that's the set up: what I need as a blind person is information and I have trouble getting it because partly I can't see and partly because the system of convenience for people who can see. You put door numbers on the door and you think you're done. Well, I would need a braille version of that door number, I would also need to know it's there in the first place so I bother looking for it. So, the things people get wrong are horriblizing the situation instead of solving the lack of information situation. Because that situation is real and the arrangement of society of the convenience of people who can see—that's also real. If you start from there, that's the end of the piece of yarn that you can untangle.

Internalized ableism is in blind people as well! We all think "oh man, blindness is a lot!" And we have to remind ourselves that what we're working with is a lack of information. Anything on top of that doesn't help solve the problem.

I'm confident that I did not answer this question because in many ways, it's the wrong question to ask. What you get wrong assumes that we don't have to start over at the beginning and we do have to start over at the beginning and unthink the things that we've already decided and assumed about blindness. This usually comes from the perspective of a sighted person thinking "What would it be like for me if I were blind?" And it's the wrong place to start from.

## **7. Are manipulatives an appropriate accommodation for paper-based questions? How many students would need this?**

The cautionary bit would be that we have to choose our objects with intense care. If you've got a picture of a bear, you think "oh I'll give the student a statuette of a bear." How many years have I been alive on this planet and people hand me a statuette of an animal and I'm like "I don't know; it's got four legs." I know what a bear is, but I don't recognize 90% of the toys. I don't recognize 110% of stuffed animals because they're inaccurate. So if you hand me something that's supposed to be a bear, I just think "that's not a bear; that's plastic." It doesn't mean anything to me. That's separate from what I know a bear is, but you can't evoke bear by giving me a four-legged statue, because I'd think "I don't know. Dog? Hamster? Cat?" I could probably tell a dog from a cat if it's done accurately, but most of the time it isn't. Then you can hand me one of a tiger, tell me it's a bear, and I'll think "Okay, that's a bear too. Whatever you want!"

You have to be careful with these things, and you have to remember that kids are told not to touch. Disabled kids who should be told to crawl all over the place, to put both hands on it and leave them there, and then to leave and come back and touch it again, to grab things, they mostly hear "don't touch that" or will control your hands or will put your hand on a thing and then remove it. Touching is not a punctual activity; touching is a skill that needs developed. Again, it's a kid's right to touch things and to know their environment. So, objects are tricky. It does depend on what the classroom environment is like. Even if I as the tester say, okay take your time and explore this object—that is probably not something the kid has heard before in her life. Mostly she's told "don't touch that" or "be careful," and depending on the kid's self-awareness, it is an agonizing situation to be exploring something tactilely while some sighted person looks at you and watches you explore it.

There's all kinds of reasons why an object needs to be chosen carefully, and objects have to be clear. And then if the question is "do you want mostly tactile pictures of things?" Then the answer is mostly a hard no. The design of tactile graphics is a fascinating field, and it's done by people who have been thinking about this for quite a long time. That does depend on whether or not a student has experience with tactile graphics.

## **8. How do we appropriately screen students who are blind/visually impaired on the alternate screener? How do we appropriately screen these students if they are not proficient in Braille?**

Well, the last part is easy; if they don't know how to read, then they don't know how to read and people should teach them how to read. It's not fair. My immediate reflexive answer is that I'm not sure to what extent the blindness matters as a distinct thing because you're talking about the whole student and respecting that whole student's autonomy and dignity. We have to think about what that student's experience has been. Does he have blindness skills? We talk a lot about braille reading as a blindness skill, and it is. However, there's also things like: does the student have a blindness skill, for example, using auditory clues to figure out where people

are and what to expect? Does the kid have the awareness of where the person is in space by listening to the way their voice changes when they move? It's a thing that we don't think about, but those skills.

### **9. What considerations should be kept in mind when working with students proficient in braille that is not used in this country (e.g., Unified English Braille)?**

If the kid reads Hebrew braille, it is the same six dots. However, it's different because it's a different alphabet. So, if you think of braille as a kit for orthographic representations—if I'm writing in Cyrillic script, then I'm going to take those dots and repurpose that cell so they're suited to that task, you can't immediately identify that it's the same alphabet because it's the same six dots. The configuration that means C in the Roman alphabet means something different. It means different things in different alphabets. Music braille is the same thing; it's the same six dots. So if the kid knows how to read braille in one alphabet, then they don't know the other one. If a kid knows Spanish braille, then at least you can count on the letters being the same.

But you can't count on the contractions being the same. You arrive at contractions at the frequency of combinations. For example, in English, we use one symbol to mean *-ing* because it happens a lot. So we have one character representation for *-ing*, but we don't need that in Spanish. So, it's not there. The good news is that the kid will have the tactile ability to read, and with training can switch alphabets just like you would visually, but that's a process.

### **10. What advice would you have for teachers to help students advocate for themselves?**

How do we treat our students in the first place that makes us have to help them advocate for themselves? The classroom should be a galaxy of them advocating for themselves. That's what teaching is! You can't separate that from anything else you do. It appears as a separate skill set when someone comes in and says "Hey, you can't bring your dog in here!" and then you think of that as advocating for yourself. Advocating for yourself is establishing a habit of expecting dignity and equality, and that's a reach of disabled people in an able-bodied context. There's a bunch of smaller things that happens on a daily basis. Do I have the right to know which bottle of juice is orange juice because I want orange juice? Do I expect that?

If you set up your classroom as a classroom where students are expected to advocate for themselves, that's wrong. The classroom is supposed to be a place when the student has the right to access information all the time, everywhere. It's that habit of knowing you belong, and it's that habit of knowing you have the right to be treated with dignity. You have the right to know what is around you. Instilling the habit of expecting equality is the most important thing. Instilling the habit of agency is telling a student that they have the right to run their own personal space and to know what's around them, and that's not supposed to be unusual. So, teaching self-advocacy is not teaching people to face down the bad guys in unusual situations. It's teaching people how to face down the bad guys in their own minds that tell them they don't

deserve access or to know what's happening. That's the place to start from; it's the very small things, not the great big things.

**11. Any other comments or thoughts that were not covered?**

Accepting inequality as natural is poison. We cannot advocate for ourselves at the big level if we're going to accept inequality at the small level.