SEL Research

A comprehensive series of studies of the Standard English Learner (SEL) Linguistic Screener and the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) by UCLA CenterX is ongoing. The following sections of research presented here are excerpted from

- Bailey, A. & Zwass, R. (2016.) A Review of Non-Mainstream American English Varieties and Student Outcomes: Phase I of the Validity Studies. A report prepared for The Academic English Mastery Program, L.A. Unified.
- Bailey, A. & Zwass, R. (2016.) Expert Review of The Standard English Learner (SEL) Linguistic Screener: Phase II of The Validity Studies. A report prepared for The Academic English Master Program, L.A. Unified.
- Valdez, C., Porras, D. & 'Ulu'ave, L. (2017). Standard English Learners, a Classroom Pedagogy Study of the Academic English Mastery Program: Year One Preliminary Report.

A comprehensive series of validity studies of the Standard English Learner (SEL) Linguistic Screener of the Academic English Mastery Program (AEMP) of the Los Angeles Unified School District (L.A. Unified) is ongoing by UCLA CenterX.

The first phase was verifying the construct(s) being measured by the SEL Linguistic Screener. The review surveyed the empirical and theoretical work on varieties of English considered to differ from the most dominant variety of English used in the U.S.3 Following the three varieties of English represented in the SEL Linguistic Screener, the targets of our search and reviews of source material were varieties of English spoken by African American speech communities, English spoken by Americans of Mexican origin, and Hawaiian speakers of English (See Appendix B for an annotated bibliography of this literature). These three speech communities have students enrolled in L.A. Unified schools, some in sizable numbers. Hispanic students comprise 73% of the district student population (and come to school with backgrounds that include familial immigration from a range of North, Central and South American countries, not only Mexico, and given multigenerational immigration contexts, students are not always Spanish-only speaking), African American students comprise just under 10% of enrolled L.A. Unified students, and Hawaiian Students comprise less than .5% of students in the district (L.A. Unified English Learner Master Plan, Chapter 4, 2012).

Similar to students with Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) who are considered English learners (EL), students from these three speech communities may have significant linguistic influences in the home and community that may impact their school participation and performance. More specifically, standard English learners have been defined by California Department of Education (2015) as "…native speakers of English who are ethnic minority students (e.g., African American, American Indian, Southeast Asian American, Mexican American, Native Pacific Islander) and whose mastery of the standard English language privileged in schools is limited because they use an ethnic-specific nonstandard dialect of English in their homes and communities and use standard English (SE) in limited ways in those communities (LeMoine, 1999; Okoye-Johnson, 2011)" (p. 882). Unlike with EL students, however, there has typically been fewer established assessment practices to identify this population of students and provide assistance with development of the kinds of English proficiency needed to meet school language demands. This is no doubt because, as Murray stresses, the assumption most often is that these students "come equipped" by virtue of being native-speakers of English.

The more specific reason to identify students who have non-Mainstream American English (NMAE) speaking backgrounds is because of the potential for a deleterious impact on students'

school achievement. Lack of familiarity with and use of features of English commonly used in texts and test and often in teacher discourse may create a language barrier in scholastic contexts. In addition to isolating features of English spoken in the three target speech communities, we therefore first searched the literature for documented ramifications for students' academic outcomes (e.g., reading development, standardized test scores). Other areas related to student education and development more broadly (e.g., misidentification of dialect as language disability or delay, quality of peer and/or teacher relationships for achievement motivation and attitudes) may influence academic outcomes by mediating the link between student language varieties and school achievement but are outside the scope of the current review.

What construct is being measured by the SEL Linguistic Screener?

Modern assessment theory is commonly guided by Messick's unifying theory of validity (Messick, 1995) that proposed validity of a measure or assessment be based on the evidence for the inferences a test user draws from student test scores about student performance. We complement this approach with organizing categories from classic assessment theory (e.g., Cronbach, 1969) that examine separately the evidence for construct validity (the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure and nothing irrelevant to the construct) and content validity (the content of the assessment items covers all aspects of the claimed construct), amongst others (e.g., concurrent and predictive validities which are dealt with in different phases and strands of the AEMP SEL Linguistic Screener validity project). We also draw on recent approaches to assessment validity that focus on the rationale used in defense of specific interpretations and uses of a measure or assessment (Kane, 2013). More specifically, in the field of language assessment, the Assessment Use Argument (AUA) approach couches validity in terms of the strength of claims about interpretations and uses of assessments of language proficiency (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). With these key tenets of assessment validity as background, we focus on what aspects of MAE the SEL Linguistic Screener is designed to measure. Language assessment has four modalities to consider: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Listening and Reading assessments test students' receptive language skills or comprehension abilities, whereas Speaking and Writing assessments test student's expressive language skills or their productive abilities (see Bailey, 2010 for further description of language constructs). These are important basic distinctions to keep in mind because the SEL Linguistic Screener requires students to listen and repeat in the Individual Sentence Retelling section (grades K-12) and to listen and write in the Whole Group Dictation Test section (grades 2-12) of the screener. Neither section of the SEL Linguistic Screener assesses students' expressive language skills; speaking is limited to imitation (the retell) and writing is limited to verbatim transcription (the dictation). Listening accuracy for replication (either oral or written) is therefore the primary construct of this screener. It is important to point out that listening comprehension is not part of the construct as it now stands. Student understanding of what they are repeating orally or in written form is not assessed. If listening accuracy is the Target Language Use (TLU, Bachman & Palmer, 2010) then results of the SEL Linguistic Screener can be interpreted to tell us about student's abilities to aurally process oral language input and retain this phonological information sufficiently well in memory to precisely mimic the input in their oral and written responses.

Defining Academic English

While MAE is a variety of English found most often in schools, it still stands in contrast to academic English that most researchers argue has to be acquired by all students regardless of their linguistic backgrounds to some degree or another depending how different

home/community uses of English are from the more formal character of scholastic uses of English (Bailey & Butler, 2007). Therefore, the construct being measured by the SEL Linguistic Screener is not necessarily academic English, although it may share some features with academic English including the administration format of the Whole Group Dictation Test section itself (taking dictation being primarily a school based language practice). Other shared features include longer and more complex sentence structures such as relative clauses (e.g., They cut down all of the trees that didn't give good fruit), and discipline-specific terminology and school-related topic vocabulary (e.g., Pharaohs, dictionary). The main purpose of a tool such as the SEL Linguistic Screener is to ensure that children are identified as they enter school with having sufficient proficiency in the variety of English used in the classroom to succeed and to go on to or continue to learn the specialized academic and professional vocabularies they may need to rely on later in life. General language proficiency as represented by MAE is "… a general communicative competence in language that enables its users to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently and appropriately according to context, and which comprises a set of generic skills and abilities…" (Murray, 2013, p. 303), whereas academic language is "…an individual's conversancy in the specialised vocabularies, concepts and knowledges associated with particular disciplines, each of which has its own distinctive patterns of meaning-making activity (genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations, narrative devices, etc.) and ways of contesting meaning…" (Murray, 2013, p. 303).

Conflating Language and SES

The construct of MAE can be confounded with socioeconomic status (SES) factors. This confound operates in two ways: (1) it is manifest in differences between MAE and NMAE in linguistic markers such as pronunciation, use of verb agreements and plural suffixes, word choice, genre differences (i.e., NMAE also encompasses varieties of English signaling social class identity/regional differences not solely ethnolinguistic varieties), and (2) lower SES can place students in higher poverty situations where they may have less access to educational resources and opportunities both prior to starting school and throughout school. In other words, NMAE may be a proxy marker for many SES-related factors that put children at risk of lower academic achievement. Lower SES backgrounds may put young students on a trajectory of less use of MAE (Hoff, 2013), but NMAE itself should not be interpreted as the cause of an academic achievement gap between students who use AAVE, ChE and HCE and their peers who do not. This caution needs to be kept in mind when we consider the TLU and the SEL Linguistic Screener. NMAE may not be the reason (or at least not the only reason) that students are struggling to learn to read or to achieve on academic assessments.

- requirements appropriate for different situations (students)
- Throughout the lesson students discussed appropriate places and persons with whom to speak home language.

Protocols for engagement:

- Think-Pair-Share (discussion)
- Raise a Righteous Hand (participation)
- Call and Response (participation)
- Whip Around (participation)