

Reasonable Testing Accommodations for English Language Learners in IR Classrooms

Written by Daniel Clausen

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/08/14/reasonable-testing-accommodations-for-english-language-learners-in-ir-classrooms/>

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English Language Learners (ELLs) are making up a growing proportion of students in university classrooms, International Relations (IR) classrooms included. For this reason, there is a growing need for instructors to become more sensitive to the needs of ELLs. A controversial issue is whether to give ELLs testing accommodations. In these situations, the instructor is faced with a tradeoff between maintaining the rigor of the course and extending help to those who might need it. Possible accommodations for learners include more time to take the test, the use of frequent breaks, allowing a bilingual dictionary, the use of a translated or easier English version of the test, and/or reviewing difficult vocabulary before a test. In many settings, some of these approaches may not be feasible for reasons of fairness. In addition, some of these accommodations may limit the motivation of students to learn and use English.

Despite the drawbacks of accommodating ELLs, there are a number of approaches that can be both fair and effective. One easy way to prepare ELLs is to review the instructions of the test sections ahead of time and demonstrate how to answer example questions with the students. This helps ensure that students don't need to think about the test too much during testing and can concentrate on the content of the exam. This step also helps relieve test anxiety for all students.

Modeling test-taking is a good technique for helping all students, not just ELLs. Many students manage to enter university without honing their test-taking skills. Modeling how to take a test, however, may be especially useful to students from countries where the culture of test-taking is different.

Accommodating ELLs means paying closer attention to word choice and usage. Do you use acronyms instead of full terms? Will students understand the acronym or be confused by it? Are your questions excessively wordy? Can the questions be simplified without compromising the rigor of the test?

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of giving tests to ELLs is how to address essay questions. ELLs will typically do better on multiple choice, true/false, and short-answer questions, but will often fail entirely on in-class essay questions. In a few cases, I have even had ELLs fail to write anything. This brings up some interesting dilemmas.

Should ELLs be allowed to finish the essay question at home? Should ELLs be given extra time in class to write their essays? Should the instructor devote significant time to coaching students prior to the test?

While there is no right answer to these questions, I have found that the best answer is to use some ambiguity in the instructions to maximize flexibility. This may sound counterintuitive, but it is especially useful if you don't know how well ELLs will do on your essay questions.

In my classes, I have told students prior to the test that they should do their best on the essay questions. No effort whatsoever will result in a zero, but leniency will be given to students who make a good faith effort to answer the questions. In the past, I have left this "leniency" rather vague. I have found though that this approach eliminates some of the anxiety regarding the written portion of the test. When I have tried this approach, not only ELLs but other

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vulnerable student populations usually gave a better effort. My follow-on “leniency” policy has differed from situation to situation, but one approach I frequently take is to leave essay questions that scored below an 80 percent ungraded and unmarked. I then give the student a chance to revise the essay after a short conference with me.

This approach stresses that education is about collaboration and support, not punishment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students who make the most of this support are usually students who are already excelling in the course. In several cases, students who had scored above an 80 percent asked for a conference to revise their essay, even though no extra points were to be awarded.

However, there are other ways to give accommodations on the essay portion of the test. Perhaps the easiest and best way to give fair accommodation to all students is to provide examples of essay questions and answers and demonstrate to students how you would grade them.

As the number of ELLs increase in university classrooms, it will be important for instructors to devise appropriate means of support. Instructors should do their best to develop approaches that are both fair and effective. Paying close attention to wordiness, modeling test-taking skills, reviewing instructions, and providing support for essay questions are four important areas where instructors can begin.

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor. He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page [here](#) or on his Goodreads page [here](#).