ABSTRACT

WHEN THE TEST IS WHAT COUNTS:
HOW HIGH-STAKES TESTING AFFECTS LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE
EDUCATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN HIGH SCHOOL

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High-stakes testing for accountability purposes is increasingly being emphasized in educational systems across the United States, with serious implications for English language learners (ELLs). The inclusion of these students in current reform efforts, federally mandated by No Child Left Behind, is a pressing concern for equity and diversity in public education today. Yet the standardized tests currently being employed to make major educational decisions such as high school graduation rely heavily on language proficiency, and are primarily language proficiency exams rather than measures of content knowledge. As a result, language has become a liability for ELLs.

This study involves qualitative research in a purposeful sample of ten New York City high schools, with in-depth ethnographic study of one high school site, and focuses on the recent requirement that ELLs pass statewide Regents Examinations in order to graduate from high school. Research questions are:

1) In what ways have reforms emphasizing high-stakes tests influenced the instructional practices and the learning experiences of ELLs in high school?

2) What are the implications of the focus on assessment for language planning and policy?

Because of the high-stakes consequences attached to standardized tests and consistently lower test scores among ELLs, they greatly impact the instruction and
educational experiences of these students in high school, as this dissertation documents. The exams are linguistically challenging and, though exam translations are helpful, they fail to truly “level the playing field.” Tests shape what content is taught in school, how it is taught, by whom it is taught, and in what language(s) it is taught. Schools have significantly changed their educational programming for ELLs to meet the demands of the Regents exams. For instance, some have increased the amount of English instruction students receive while others have increased native-language instruction instead.

Tests have become de facto language policy in schools. I argue that traditional notions of language planning fail to describe ad hoc language policies created by tests. Moreover, tests are a defining force in the daily lives of ELLs and the educators who serve them, and an issue of social justice when solely punitive in result.