
Exploring possibilities and potentials for multilingual (ML) assessment in the Canadian educational context

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This paper reports findings from a research study conducted in Ontario, Canada exploring possibilities and generating empirical support for multilingual (ML) assessment in the Canadian educational context, to address unique teaching and learning needs of bi/multilingual learners from migrant backgrounds. Broadly, ML approaches to assessment align with current understandings of language as a multilingual construct, reflecting the creative, dynamic, and strategic language practices of bi/multilingual speakers and communities (Arias & Schissel 2021). Empirical support for ML assessment indicates positive effect and pedagogic washback, suggesting that for bi/multilingual students, the use of ML assessments contributes to better performance and more accurately reflects student knowledge (de Backer et al. 2017; Shohamy et al. 2022).

The study took place in two large urban school districts in Ontario, Canada. The first phase of the project, completed in 2020 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, gathered perceptual data through an online open-ended survey of 16 teachers about issues and challenges in assessing bi/multilingual learners. Based on insights from the survey data, the second phase of the project, completed during the 2021-2022 academic year, comprised fieldwork and collaborative inquiry conducted with three educator teams, including 22 elementary and secondary ESL and mathematics teachers and instructional leaders.

Data were generated from teacher interviews, focus groups, field-notes, artifacts of student work and digital images of assessment tasks. These data were analyzed thematically to construct meaningful patterns in how teachers engage linguistically adaptive bi/multilingual practices in the assessment context. Broadly, teachers developed ML assessments for both formative and summative assessment purposes. Engaging digital technology tools and incorporating both student- and teacher-initiated strategies, teachers made space for student choice and voice across processes and products of assessment, promoting translanguaging practices as both a scaffold and resource for learning.

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