

Enhancing Educational Opportunities for Immigrant  
Students: A Study on Performance-Based Assessment and  
Language Acquisition

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**Abstract:**

The pursuit of equal educational opportunities has remained a persistent concern within the landscape of the United States educational system (O'Day & Smith, 2016; Reeves, 2004). The evident repercussions stemming from limited access and inadequate representation manifest unmistakably in the disparities encountered by marginalized groups, including minority, low socioeconomic status (SES), and English Language Learner (ELL) students. These disparities underscore the pressing necessity for ongoing research and enhancement of strategies aimed at supporting the diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideas of immigrant students during their progression into English proficiency and their navigation of collegiate pathways. In response to these imperatives, the present study endeavors to examine the integration of performance-based assessment (Pbats) within an international high school predominantly catering to recently arrived immigrants in New York City. Employing an ethnographic framework, this investigation delves into the encounters of immigrant students within the context of high schools in New York City. Through an exploration of the presentation of Pbats and their consequent influence on language acquisition, this research advocates for transformative modifications that facilitate the access of immigrant students to programs, establishments, and frameworks committed to comprehensive and all-encompassing educational paradigms. The outcomes of this inquiry are poised to illuminate effective methods through which high schools can provide enhanced support for immigrant students, cultivating affirmative and human-centered encounters throughout their trajectory toward advanced education. This study's revelations hold profound ramifications for the formulation of policies and the allocation of resources, addressing the distinct challenges that confront immigrant students during their transitional phase toward higher education.

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**Background Study:**

The pursuit of equality in educational opportunities has been an enduring focal point within the landscape of the United States education system, as indicated by extensive research (O'Day & Smith, 2016). The use of educational testing in the United States has been criticized for its inequitable effects on different populations and investigations have consistently underscored the critical significance of addressing the disparities prevalent in educational attainment and access. Specifically, studies have brought to light the pronounced inequities experienced by minority and low socioeconomic status (SES) students, particularly in terms of their constrained access to rigorous curricula and advanced courses. This disparity in educational access has garnered significant attention within the discourse on educational trajectories (Kanno & Kangas, 2014).

Moreover, a pertinent yet often misunderstood challenge in pre-K-12 education pertains to the effective education of students who have not yet attained proficiency in the English language. This issue has been recognized as a multifaceted concern with implications for pedagogical strategies and educational policies. García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) have highlighted the complexity of this matter, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches that go beyond conventional teaching methodologies. The prevailing neoliberal education framework, which emphasizes market-oriented reforms and individualized competition, has contributed to a prevailing narrative that often marginalizes bilingual youth whose primary language is not English. These students are frequently positioned as deficient or lacking in essential skills, which further exacerbates the challenges they encounter within the education system. This mischaracterization not only perpetuates a disempowering perception of bilingual students but also inhibits the realization of their potential within the educational context (McCoy, 2023).

The political landscape in the United States, especially during pivotal periods such as the Trump era, the post-Trump transition, and the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has played a significant role in shaping policies that directly impact immigrant families and, consequently, English as a second language (ESL) students. Against this backdrop, the policies enacted by both the Republican and Democratic parties have often diverged sharply when it comes to immigration. The shifts in governmental

leadership have consistently heralded substantial changes in immigration policies. Notably, the Trump administration's tenure was marked by policies that bore a profound impact on immigrant families, particularly those with ESL students. These policies often instilled a sense of uncertainty and insecurity among these families, consequently affecting the educational experiences of ESL students. The prevailing stance towards immigration during this period contributed to an environment where immigrant families, including ESL students, grappled with heightened anxieties due to concerns about their status, familial integrity, and overall well-being. The aftermath of the Trump era and the subsequent transition to the Biden administration ushered in a renewed approach to immigration policy. The Biden administration, acknowledging the need for change, undertook significant efforts to dismantle several of the stringent and inhumane immigration policies that had been instituted by its predecessor. This shift was characterized by the inclusion of more compassionate and empathetic elements in immigration policies. These changes were designed not only to address the broader concerns surrounding immigration but also to mitigate the adverse effects that such policies had on the confidence and well-being of ESL students within immigrant families.

The cyclical nature of policy shifts underscores the pivotal role of the political landscape in shaping the experiences of immigrant families and ESL students. The abrupt policy reversals and the underlying uncertainty have contributed to a sense of instability, which, in turn, has the potential to erode the confidence of ESL students as they navigate the intricacies of the educational system. As the nation grapples with the multifaceted challenges posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the intersection of immigration policy, ESL education, and the broader well-being of immigrant families remains a complex and evolving area of concern.

### **Where Can We Go From Here?**

The interpretation of performance-based assessments displays significant variability contingent upon how teachers incorporate them, the academic field, the rubrics employed, and the characteristics of the student cohorts (Palm, 2008). Generally, a performance-based assessment evaluates students'

adeptness in applying the acquired proficiencies and knowledge gleaned from a specific module or modules of study. Conventionally, these assessments present tasks that impel students to employ their advanced cognitive faculties in generating an output or successfully navigating a procedural sequence (Chun, 2010). The range of tasks spans from uncomplicated constructed responses (e.g., research papers, presentations, and self-reflections) to intricate endeavors such as formulating an elaborate blueprint for mental health regulations. Arguably, the most authentic assessments are those that demand students to execute tasks closely resembling the duties undertaken by professionals, be an artist, engineers, laboratory technicians, financial analysts, or consumer advocates. Within the context of the particular international high school under scrutiny in my research, a captivating educational framework unfolds, where students engage in a dynamic learning process centered around Performance-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs).

These PBATs, meticulously designed and ratified by the esteemed New York Performance Standards Consortium, serve as the cornerstone of scholastic evaluation within this unique educational milieu. Emanating from a bedrock of project-based learning, this approach not only fosters collaboration but also embraces the diverse linguistic proficiencies and native languages that students bring to the table. The hallmark of this approach is the student's involvement in multifaceted, mixed-level groups that collectively traverse the terrain of six distinct PBATs, each representing a pivotal facet of holistic education. The holistic tapestry of PBATs encompasses a comprehensive spectrum, enabling students to cultivate and demonstrate their prowess across a diverse range of academic domains. As they embark on this educational journey, students undertake the challenge of completing a cumulative total of six distinct PBATs, each of which is meticulously designed to assess their competencies and comprehension in key subject areas. These encompass the nuanced artistry of crafting a Personal Statement that reflects their intellectual voyage, the eloquent weaving of ideas in a Literacy Essay, the scholarly expedition of a History Research Paper, the intriguing dance with mathematical concepts through a Math Project, the empirical exploration entailed in a Science Experiment Lab Report, and the further maturation of their Native Language skills.

What lends distinctiveness to this approach is the personalized agency granted to students. Commencing from the 10th grade, students are afforded the autonomy to meticulously curate their educational odyssey, as they determine the chronological trajectory of their engagement with these multifaceted PBATs. This autonomy extends to the freedom of choice, permitting them to select the sequence in which they embark on these intellectual quests, thereby fostering a sense of ownership over their learning pathway. In summation, the international high school experience herein unfolds as an intricate tapestry of learning, skill cultivation, and assessment, with PBATs standing as the linchpin. By embracing the principles of project-based learning, linguistic diversity, and tailored academic engagement, students are primed not only to excel within the realms of these assessments but also to emerge as holistic and proficient graduates equipped to tackle the multifaceted challenges of the contemporary world.

**Research Methods:**

In this study, I will utilize an ethnographic approach to delve into the unique experiences of immigrant students in high schools located in New York City for 5 weeks. Ethnography entails fully immersing oneself in the natural environment of the participants and employing techniques like participant observation to gain an extensive and profound comprehension of their viewpoints and the significance they attach to their encounters. This methodology aims to uncover unexpected occurrences and acquire insights into the lives of the participants within their educational contexts.

At the core of ethnography lies a sense of genuine curiosity and receptiveness, aiming to assimilate into the group under study and comprehend their distinctive social realm or "kingdom of God." It is of utmost importance to approach the research with a readiness to question any preconceived notions and pre-established knowledge. Instead of imposing preconceptions, the researcher must embrace uncertainties and allow the research findings to guide the exploration and interpretation of the participants' experiences. This approach facilitates a more genuine and nuanced comprehension of the

immigrant students' perspectives, yielding comprehensive insights into their educational journeys and the hurdles they confront.

To implement this approach, we will engage in participant observations, meticulously recording field notes that encompass the entire process of performance-based assessments (Pbats). These notes will chronicle various aspects, including the Pbats timeline, dialogues between students and teachers, and nonverbal cues such as body language. By employing these methods, we aim to capture the essence of the student's interactions and experiences in a holistic and authentic manner, enriching our understanding of their educational endeavors.

### **Findings:**

This research study delves into the transformative potential of Performance-Based Assessments (PBATs) in empowering English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, particularly within the context of immigrant students in high schools. The investigation sheds light on the multifaceted impact of PBATs on ESL students' educational journeys, emphasizing their language proficiency development and the bolstering of self-confidence. The findings underscore the remarkable significance of PBATs as a holistic tool, not only for assessing subject mastery but also for catalyzing the comprehensive growth of ESL learners. The results of the study unveil the profound effects of PBATs on ESL students' learning experiences.

The research identifies PBATs as a unique avenue for ESL learners to demonstrate subject mastery, serving as a robust indicator of their readiness for higher education. PBATs go beyond assessing students' cognitive understanding, requiring them to articulate their ideas through writing, speaking (presentation), and skillfully addressing probing questions. Furthermore, PBATs focus on the process of learning, evaluating not just the immediate scores students achieve but also their long-term study strategies and approaches. For a closer look, let's examine an example from my fieldwork journal concerning an English PBAT:

In this instance, the student's paper was based on Elizabeth Acevedo's "The Poet X," a young adult novel published on March 6, 2018, by HarperTeen. The essay topic for this PBAT allowed students to select relevant themes such as religion, family relationships, sexuality, or voice within the novel. They were required to analyze how Elizabeth Acevedo explores their chosen theme in "The Poet X," providing evidence from the text and drawing connections to broader themes, character development, conflicts, and the characters' journey to finding their voices.

This analysis showcases how PBATs equip students with the ability to decipher key components of the English Language Arts (ELA) Regents exam, which is designed to prepare them for college. The ELA Regents exam assesses language proficiency within the context of literary analysis, demanding a set of skills and knowledge that often surpasses what many English Language Learners (ELLs) arriving at or after ninth grade possess. A specific example from my fieldwork journal demonstrates the alignment between PBAT criteria and the ELA Regents exam:

During the PBAT evaluation, the teacher (C) directed the student (A) to a specific page and asked A to choose any page he wished to demonstrate the literary devices he had referenced but not examined in his paper, specifically imagery, conflict, and metaphors. A struggled to find metaphors and define imagery, prompting C to guide him by having him read a particular passage aloud. C then challenged A to identify where imagery was used, emphasizing A's potential with encouraging words. A highlighted the author's use of XYZ in that passage, and C prompted him to focus on the word "shows."

This example illustrates that PBATs primarily assess students' skills in literary analysis and essay writing, starting from their initial research paper, and then extending to an examination of vocabulary and language usage. Additionally, PBATs require students to analyze and interpret poetry, including identifying poetic devices and explaining their impact on the poem's meaning. Furthermore, students must demonstrate their knowledge of literary terms and concepts such as foreshadowing, irony, allusion, and

tone. These parallels between PBATs and the ELA Regents exam underscore their role in preparing students for future academic endeavors in college.

However, it is important to note that the ELA Regents exam emphasizes time management, with specific time limits for each section, testing students' ability to write under timed conditions. In contrast, PBATs foster students' problem-solving abilities and effective time orientation, particularly during the face-to-face presentation section. This comprehensive approach not only promotes language development but also reinforces language acquisition, ultimately contributing to the overall academic growth of ESL students.

In addition to English PBATs, as previously mentioned, there are also PBATs in History, Engineering, Mathematics, and internships. PBATs serve as a means to connect students' experiences and interests, providing a comprehensive understanding of historical events. Let's delve into an example of a History PBAT, specifically focusing on the relationship between the United States and Ukraine:

In an extended session encompassing history, literature, and personal statement PBATs, a student named E presented his thesis advocating for US military support to aid civilians and contribute to Ukraine's freedom and peace. E supported his argument by highlighting that the US could help mitigate the ongoing war, which was causing harm to countless innocent civilians. He further emphasized Ukraine's status as an ally, quoting President Biden's assertion that "we understand freedom is not free." Addressing the counterargument of nuclear war risk, he cited President Putin's statement that he would not use nuclear weapons against any country or Ukraine. In conclusion, E asserted that military support would promote peace in Ukraine and assist those in need. During his history presentation, E initially read from the slides while occasionally facing away from the panelists, though he later offered clarifications to support his arguments.

The PBATs include questions for teachers, categorized into history-related inquiries. PBATs not only encompass the fundamental knowledge required for the ELA Regents exam but also encourage

students to learn from their mistakes and step beyond their comfort zones. Consider a passage from my fieldwork notes, reflecting the teacher's expectations regarding student performance:

Before the presentation, the panelists, including myself, briefly discussed the student's paper and determined the focus of the presentation and Q&A session. One panelist remarked, "His analysis was weak, and I will try to push him to see if he can do better." This insight revealed that PBAT assessments prioritize improvement over mere content recitation.

As DeBrincat (2015) aptly mentioned, learning is a long-term process. Rather than dismissing mistakes as futile, we should view them as opportunities for growth and understanding. In this context, teachers aim to motivate students to reflect on their learning journey through PBATs, emphasizing the importance of addressing errors and enhancing their comprehension of the subject matter.

Some may question the utility of PBATs, particularly concerning a student's overall performance against a rubric. Can students effectively access and present their knowledge? Is it easier for students compared to high-stakes exams like the Regents? Consider another example from a PBAT Q&A session:

A visibly nervous student sought support from a friend, stating, "Pray for me" before beginning his presentation.

One panelist adjusted the difficulty of the question by providing a short poem rich in imagery techniques for the student to analyze. Despite this assistance, the student struggled to provide an answer. It was evident that the student was under significant pressure, and his inability to respond led to embarrassment as he lowered his head and covered his face with his hands. This experience underscores that PBATs not only strong presentation skills but also the ability to manage stress when facing challenges.

Observing the student's struggle during the presentation, it becomes apparent that although PBATs do not impose specific time constraints and target scores, they can still induce considerable stress.

Students grapple with concerns regarding their presentation skills and performance, fearing they may not

adequately convey their understanding. Distinct from high-stakes tests, PBATs offer flexibility in criteria and dialogue. Teachers tailor questions and goals to accommodate varying student abilities. While students may experience nervousness, the absence of rigid time constraints allows for a more adaptable testing environment.

In the aftermath of the PBAT presentation, we observed the following student experience:

Following our deliberation, the student was requested to return to the classroom. When informed of his successful outcome, the student exhibited visible relief, with the announcement notably boosting his confidence. During this interaction, we thoughtfully acknowledged the student's strengths and areas for improvement. Since he had another history PBAT presentation scheduled in just an hour and a half, we provided him with valuable rehearsal tips. As my fellow panelists and I prepared to exit the classroom, the student approached us with an inquiry about his letter grade. However, we informed him that only pass and fail statuses were disclosed, without specifying his letter grade. Instead, we reiterated the areas where he could improve during his rehearsal. This decision was made to provide the student with constructive feedback rather than potentially diminishing his confidence by revealing that he had barely passed.

Furthermore, this research underscores the vital role of PBATs in bolstering the confidence of ESL students as they engage with their native language. PBATs serve as a platform through which ESL learners can confidently express their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives, empowering them to embrace and celebrate their linguistic diversity. It is imperative to acknowledge that enrolling in and actively participating in higher education has become increasingly critical for achieving success in the US workforce. Many immigrant families are pursuing the American dream, aspiring to establish themselves and provide better opportunities for future generations. However, providing adequate linguistic support can be inherently complex, and immigrant students may be susceptible to academic and linguistic segregation within and across schools. Numerous studies have explored these challenges, highlighting the

placement of immigrant students in less rigorous ESL programs, which may exacerbate academic segregation, potentially leaving them ill-prepared for college. This issue becomes particularly problematic at the secondary level, where English Language (EL) students may accumulate academic disadvantages due to repeated placement in EL-focused courses, which, whether intentionally or not, cover less material and progress at a slower pace to accommodate the linguistic needs of ELL students. Therefore, the relationship between students' school-based linguistic status and the immigrant advantage warrants careful consideration.

The inclusion of native language assessments within the PBATs framework underscores the value of linguistic diversity, providing ESL students with a sense of belonging and recognition within the educational environment. This research also highlights the inclusive and supportive teacher-student relationships fostered by PBATs. The assessment process creates an environment in which students and teachers collaborate closely, transcending traditional power dynamics. In the current US education system, immigrant students often face discrimination based on their language abilities. To illustrate, one student mentioned during their Native Language PBAT presentation:

“The purpose of using my native language in the student-led sessions is to allow me to speak accurately and fluently to my family about my experiences at school this term. It is also convenient for family members whose native language is not English to better understand my expression. Throughout the project, I wrote notes and outlines in my native language and recorded my speeches in my native language. I edit video content in my native language. Using my native language helps me communicate my ideas more clearly and effectively and serves as a Chinese translator in the chat between teachers and family members.”

From this dialogue, it becomes evident that the purpose of native language PBATs is to bridge the communication gap between students and their families, facilitating a clearer and more effective exchange of experiences and ideas.

Furthermore, PBATs foster the cultivation of mentor relationships between students and educators, forming a supportive network that nurtures the academic, linguistic, and personal growth of ESL learners. In summary, this research underscores the multifaceted impact of PBATs in advancing the educational journeys of ESL learners. Both teachers and students have their respective goals, the realization of which hinges on their ability to negotiate and resolve conflicts. In the context of PBATs, we observe that the relationships between students and teachers tend to be neutral. The transition from conventional test preparation materials to the comprehensive preparation of Performance-Based Assessments (PBATs) presented a formidable challenge for educators. Universally acknowledged as the most precious but scarce resource in this endeavor was time. Each New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC) school adopted a tailored approach to meet their unique needs. In my colleague's school, they appointed one teacher per PBAT to assume the role of a leader annually (S. Nuonsy, personal communication, February 2, 2022). The designated PBAT leader, who had assumed this responsibility on multiple occasions, described it as demanding and high-pressure, encompassing not only guiding students through their projects but also coordinating them for the entire school (S. Nuonsy, personal communication, February 2, 2022).

PBAT teachers needed to focus their efforts on guiding students through their research projects and ensuring the creation of well-crafted reports. To alleviate the burden on these teachers, the school devised a meticulously structured schedule, allowing each student undertaking a PBAT to be paired with a mentor teacher. This arrangement provided more instructional time than the standard high school model (S. Nuonsy, personal communication, February 2, 2022). Another challenge stemmed from periodic revisions of the rubrics by the NYPSC, necessitating teachers to periodically adjust their teaching methods (A. Cook, personal communication, February 2, 2022). Certainly, numerous low-income students confront language barriers and may lack robust English language skills. Unfortunately, many students find themselves placed in remedial courses upon entering college. Additionally, communities across the nation face the increasing responsibility of accommodating new immigrants. While national policies may influence the influx of refugees, enduring factors like poverty, conflict, and environmental challenges

persist. To prioritize addressing the needs of students facing significant challenges, it is prudent to invest time in exploring competency-based International Schools. By fostering language proficiency, enhancing self-confidence, and nurturing inclusive relationships, PBATs emerge as a potent instrument for cultivating the holistic development of immigrant students. These findings not only shed light on the transformative potential of PBATs but also advocate for their broader integration into educational practices, with the overarching goal of offering ESL learners an enriched and empowering learning experience.

In conclusion, this research underscores the multifaceted impact of PBATs in advancing the educational trajectories of ESL learners. As discussed by various scholars, the teacher-student relationship is an interpersonal dynamic that evolves over time, similar to any other relationship. This interaction involves information exchange, mutual adjustments, and goal achievement. PBATs offer a unique setting where students and teachers collaborate on an equal footing, fostering constructive interactions that are not solely based on language proficiency. Thus, PBATs provide a promising avenue to address the academic challenges faced by immigrant students, ultimately supporting their holistic development.

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