



Menken, K. (2008). *English learners left behind: Standardized testing as language policy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

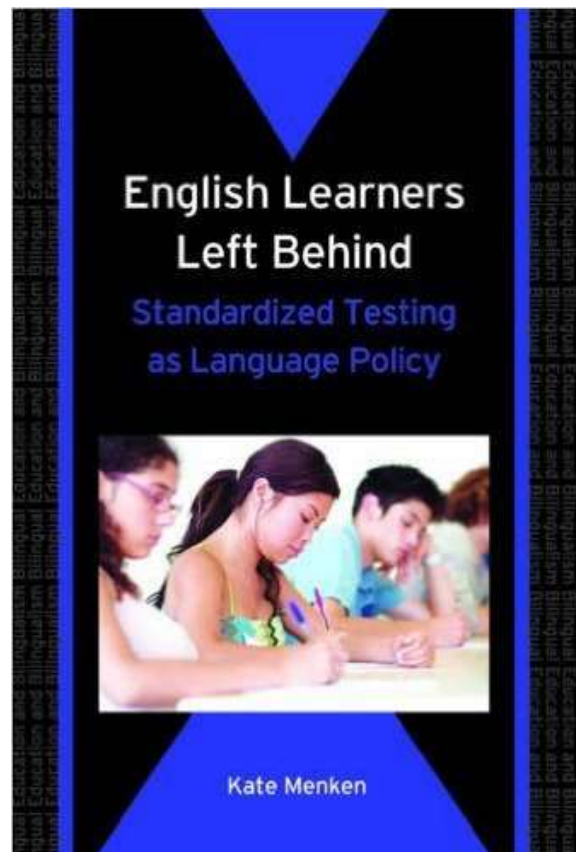
Pp. viii +207

ISBN: 978-1-85359-997-2

**Reviewed by Betsy Gilliland  
University of California – Davis  
United States**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, the 2001 reenactment of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act) has introduced an era of increased accountability and focus on the educational progress of English learners (ELs) at schools teaching low-income, diverse students. While in the past ELs were often excused from taking high-stakes assessments, resulting in their academic progress being ignored by accountability measures, NCLB now requires that ELs be tested within three years of their enrollment in U.S. schools (Shaul & Ganson, 2005). This new focus on the test performance of students who have traditionally scored at the lower end of standardized measures has increased the pressure on schools to make sure that their lower achieving students are prepared for testing season.

Critiques of NCLB highlight many negative aspects of this law's effects on ELs across the United States. While schools are now responsible for monitoring the learning of ELs, federal legislation disregards research-



based means of helping students learn both language and content, and teachers are now seen as mere implementers of policy (Evans & Hornberger, 2005). A California lawsuit alleged that the state's English-only CST assessments violate NCLB provisions, as testing ELs in English without any form of accommodation conflates their content knowledge with their knowledge of English, a language that they by definition are still learning (Gándara & Baca, 2008). Florida school administrators checked up on teachers to make sure they were following a scripted pacing schedule with a reading program the teachers consider inappropriate for EL learning needs (Harper, Platt, Naranjo, & Boynton, 2007).

Kate Menken's book adds substantial support to this list of critiques. Menken describes a study she conducted in New York City high schools, examining the influence of assessment-related reforms on instructional practices and English learners' experiences. Menken approached this study with a "pyramid design" for research, in which she observed and interviewed teachers, students, and administrators at one school in depth over a year; observed a few times and interviewed teachers, students, and administrators at three other schools; and visited once and interviewed a few teachers and administrators at six more schools. With this methodology, she was able not only to get a sense of the breadth of approaches different schools in the city were taking as they addressed NCLB requirements, but also to explore individual students' and teachers' experiences with the implementation of this law.

Menken begins her book with an introduction to the concepts behind language policy and planning, explaining that she takes Spolsky's (2004) broad definition of language policy as encompassing both the overt and covert decisions made in a society around language. Menken explains that while the United States has never had explicit language policies, much of the country's legislation around education has served as language

policy. NCLB's current focus on assessment and accountability directly impacts the educational experiences of ELs in American schools. The book continues with an overview of New York City's application of federal requirements in its public school system, which serves a population in which 40% of the students speak a language other than English at home and 14% are still classified as ELs. New York State chose to make its existing Regents exam series, originally designed for an honors program, into a high school graduation requirement and assessment measure for NCLB accountability. One problem, Menken points out, is that these exams are extremely difficult for students who are still learning academic English. While students are permitted to take the content exams (math, science, and history) in one of five other languages, they must still pass the English language arts exam to graduate.

The second part of Menken's book examines the findings from her study and addresses the issues standardized tests cause in ELs' daily school life. In the first chapter of this section, Menken analyzes the New York Regents' Mathematics and English Language Arts exams for the linguistic challenges they pose to the recently arrived ELs who must take these tests as graduation requirements. To demonstrate the wide variety of high school exit exams in use across the United States, Menken compares the Regents exams with Texas's TAKS Mathematics test and California's CAHSEE English test. Though quite different in form and content, all these tests demand of students a high-level knowledge of academic-register English. Menken also discusses the accommodations allowed under NCLB, very few of which are actually implemented in standardized testing. New York does publish translations of its content Regents exams, but requires that students choose to answer either entirely in English or in the language of the translation; code-switching and nonstandard varieties of those languages are not permitted. Menken points out that few of the students who

struggle with the academic language of these tests speak entirely in one language or another but instead use both English and their other language(s) mixed together in nonstandard ways, thus not benefiting from the translated versions of the tests as the state intended.

Continuing her examination of the effects of standardized testing in the lives of New York City's English learners, Menken introduces interview and focus group data from her conversations with ELs at several high schools and with their teachers and administrators. The students report experiencing pressure from their schools to either master academic English or leave school in order not to lower the schools' reported test scores. Menken's participants told stories of students' being coerced into taking multiple periods of test-preparation English classes, being required to attend Saturday test preparation programs, and being encouraged to return to their native countries in order to finish high school rather than attempt the tests in New York. Teachers also expressed frustration with their schools' focus on test preparation, reporting conflicts with their own principles for teaching ELs. Because many of their students have the option of taking the Regents exams in their first language, content teachers in bilingual programs at one school chose to teach their classes entirely in Spanish or Chinese, rather than using both the students' first language and English as traditional bilingual education should do. Other teachers felt obligated to teach entirely in English, without using the students' first language, on the assumption that their students needed to know the content in the language of the test, in this case English. Menken reflects that both of these choices are evidence of *de facto* language policy in action, an acknowledgement that the Regents exam is incidental language policy.

In the final section of the book, Menken reflects that the potential benefits of increased accountability are outweighed by the effects of testing policy on English language learners. Taking a social justice perspective,

Menken considers how an emphasis on test scores discriminates against ELs, who are denied the opportunity to learn communicative English in ESL classes that are now overly focused on the literary analysis required by the Regents exam. ELs are also barred from admission to the district's experimental small schools, which are concerned with keeping their test scores high. Menken concludes the book with recommendations for reconceptualizing testing and language policy. Drawing on Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) onion metaphor, she argues for schools and teachers to play a greater role in implementing language policies, as well as for language policies to be explicitly and coherently written and implemented. To support English learners' linguistic development, we need policies that focus on students' opportunities to learn while measuring their progress, not just their achievement of preset outcomes.

Menken's book, though focused on specific New York City policies, resonates for states like California that also have large populations of ELs in struggling urban schools. Her analysis of the English Language Arts section of the CAHSEE contributes to an understanding of how state tests challenge ELs, as well as how the complex language of testing invalidates these measures of language learners' content knowledge. Unlike New York, however, California does not allow students to take high stakes tests in languages other than English, thus adding to the challenge that students face in trying to graduate from high school. In addition, with Proposition 227 having drastically reduced the opportunity for students to take bilingual classes, California's ELs do not have the option of learning content material and test preparation skills in their first language. Furthermore, EL students in California's rural schools may face different challenges than those in the urban schools Menken studied, as their educational trajectories often differ from those of their urban counterparts.

Menken's study gives a deep portrait of the experiences of New York City's adolescent ELs as they face the effects of state and federal accountability policies. Though not explicitly language policy, implementation of these tests serves to both position ELs as deficient and punish their schools for allowing them to continue their studies. In the new

political climate, concrete evidence such as that presented in this book ought to serve as evidence for more equitable treatment of English learners when No Child Left Behind comes up for reauthorization. Language policy should support, not denigrate, young people in American public schools.

---


## References

- Evans, B. A., & Hornberger, N. H. (2005). No Child Left Behind: Repealing and unpeeling federal language education policy in the United States *Language Policy*, 4(1), 87-106.
- Gándara, P., & Baca, G. (2008). NCLB and California's English language learners: The perfect storm. *Language Policy*, 7(3), 201-216.
- Harper, C., Platt, E., Naranjo, C., & Boynton, S. (2007). Marching in unison: Florida ESL teachers and No Child Left Behind. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(3), 642-651.
- Ricento, T. K., & Hornberger, N. H. (1996). Unpeeling the onion: Language planning and policy and the ELT professional. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 401-427.
- Shaul, M. S., & Ganson, H. C. (2005). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: The federal government's role in strengthening accountability for student performance. *Review of Research in Education*, 29, 151-154.

## About the Reviewer

**Betsy Gilliland** is a Ph.D. student in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis, with an emphasis in Language, Literacy, and Culture. Her research interests are writing instruction, language socialization, and language policy issues related to the experiences of long-term adolescent English learners in California high schools. She has taught academic writing and conversational English at universities in Uzbekistan and California.



 *Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas/ Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview