

When planning assessments, should assessments be conducted in the ELL's native language?

In planning any assessment, begin with a clear purpose of the assessment process. Under IDEA, the purpose of the assessment process is to determine possible developmental delays or learning difficulties. When planning assessments of ELLs, be cognizant of how development and learning are influenced by social and cultural contexts, and by first and second language acquisition and development. Assessment of ELLs is a complex undertaking involving the documentation of both language proficiency and academic achievement. Therefore, the assessment needs to occur in two stages:

1. Procedures for formally assessing students' language proficiency in the student's first and second language, and
2. Procedures for determining students' level of cognitive functioning, learning styles, instructional level, and specific instructional needs in the student's first and second language. *(Sources: Fradd, Gibbons, Roseberry-McKibbin, Garcia, Ortiz, Artiles, Klingler, Harry, Gottlieb, Baca)*

Children learning in two languages use both of their languages to communicate ideas and demonstrate what they know. Assessment must take into account the concepts known by the student in the first language and the concepts being learned in the second language. Assessment must compare both what students know in each language and what students know cumulatively, i.e., across languages. (Garcia & Ortiz) For example, as a result of opportunity and exposure, bilingual children may be more proficient in one of the two languages when talking about a specific topic or talking in a specific context. The differences in size of vocabulary make it appear as if bilingual children typically have smaller vocabularies in each language than monolingual children of the same age who are learning the same language. When their two vocabularies are added together with translation equivalents counted only once, however, bilingual children typically have vocabularies of an age-appropriate size.¹

Bilinguals can access either or both of their languages in many situations and often use both of their languages in problem-solving and communicative situations. (Escamilla) Therefore, assessment must consider how two languages interact. Two languages rarely develop at the same rate in students learning a second language. In fact, unbalanced development of two languages can be expected and is typical in bilingual acquisition. When bilingual children produce rather unique errors in their language, it is most likely the result of cross-linguistic influence. For example, code switching is a natural part of communication patterns. When speaking their non proficient language, bilingual children may use words from their more proficient language, if they do not know them yet in their less proficient language.

Developmental language patterns (stages) are the same *overall* for monolingual and bilingual children. Similar kinds of errors occur in the language development of bilingual and monolingual children mastering the language system. Therefore, assessment must

¹ Genesee, F., Paradis, J., Crago, M., (2004) Dual Language Development and Disorders, A Handbook on Bilingualism and Second Language Learning, Paul Brookes Publishing

consider the similarities and differences in developmental behaviors. For example, when a student's performance is different from what adults expect, there is a danger of overlooking the fact that the student's communicative performance in the assessment process is influenced by social and cultural contexts. Examples of differences in social and cultural contexts include: children interacting verbally more often with siblings or peers than with adults, young children describing objects more easily than labeling objects, and stories characterized by multiple linked topics structured in a less linear fashion without clear patterns of beginning, middle and end.

Every effort should be made to provide assessments in both languages for ELLs. The following are important considerations in planning assessments for ELLs:

- Confer with parents and cultural brokers to recognize how development and learning are influenced by social and cultural contexts. (Harry & Kalyanpur)
- Recognize that while language acquisition and developmental language patterns and rates are the same *overall* for monolingual and bilingual children, there are also typical behaviors that are developmentally and culturally unique to bilingual speakers. (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago; Escamilla)
- Recognize that standardized assessment tools may not be valid or reliable; conduct assessments in authentic environments using a variety of formative tools. (Hoover, Klinger, Baca, & Patton)
- Collect multiple data sources gathered at multiple data points. (Gottlieb)
- Use assessment measures that are sensitive to both maturational processes as well as the trajectory of first and second language acquisition. (Ballantyne, Sanderman & McLaughlin).
- Compare both what students know in each language and what students know cumulatively (i.e., across languages), to avoid underestimating student abilities and/or inaccurately interpreting rates of progress and levels of performance. (Garcia & Ortiz)
- Demonstrate that the disability is evident in both languages. (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago)

Recognizing that in some situations it may not be possible or feasible to assess ELLs in their native language, continuous monitoring of progress toward acquiring English proficiency should be a central focus of assessments for students in English as a Second Language (ESL), Sheltered English Instruction (SEI) and/or general education programs. (Garcia & Ortiz)

Note:

The requirements for eligibility to receive special education services under MA G.L. c. 71B state: "No matter what evaluation method used, the team must ensure that the identified area of difficulty is not primarily the result of cultural factors or limited English proficiency. (*MA DESE SLD TOOL 3 Eligibility Requirements, Component 3: Exclusionary Factors (34 CFR 300.309(a)(3)) SLD - Specific Learning Disability*)"

IDEA 2004 recommends the evaluation procedures must be conducted "in the language and form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is not feasible to so provide or administer."