



# Culturally Competent Assessment of English Language Learners for Special Education Services

BY LIONEL A. BLATCHLEY & MATTHEW Y. LAU

Students who are learning English as a second or third language often lag behind native English speakers in academic skills and may display differences in behavior or social skills compared to their native English speaking peers. These English language learners (ELLs) are therefore at risk for referral for special services including special education.

Research and experience encourage educators to use appropriate, nonbiased approaches to screen ELL students to determine their need for support within the general education program and to implement culturally competent instructional strategies prior to considering referral to special education (e.g., see Lau & Blatchley, 2009). But what about those ELL students who make little or no progress despite additional supports? When special education services are considered for ELL students, school personnel are urged to take a broad, ecological perspective, collecting data through a multidimensional, multi-task approach and interpreting results within the context of the students' unique cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds.

## USE OF STANDARDIZED, NORM-REFERENCED TESTS

Using nationally standardized, norm-referenced test (NRT) scores to determine eligibility for special education requires considerable caution with ELL students. As ELL students present a continuum of English proficiency and acculturation, the appropriateness of NRTs for a given student depends on the similarity of that student's experience to that of the test's standardization population.

Tasks from standardized tests may be administered to find out what skills the learner does and does not have. However, if the learner's background experience is significantly different from that of the group on which the test was normed, it is inappropriate to use the normative scores to draw conclusions regarding student needs and special education eligibility. The use of native language interpreters does not negate this principle, and in fact introduces other complicating factors. For instance, current standardized tests do not involve the use of interpreters as part of their standardization procedure. Moreover, some test items just cannot be translated from English to another language without seriously distorting their original meaning or without suggesting the correct or expected response. These extraneous factors could seriously compromise the validity and utility of the assessment.

## WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS

Learning how to work with interpreters is a critical skill for school psychologists, special educators, and others involved in assessment and planning for ELL students. Given the limitations of norm-referenced measures for ELLs, informal data gathered from parents and other family members through an interpreter is essential. During formal assessment, interpreters in partnership with school personnel can ensure that task directions are understood by the student, and that responses are understood by the examiner. Further, the presence and participation of the interpreter communicates respect of the student's culture and language, and acknowledges the impact of his/her limited English proficiency.

***Using and training professional interpreters.*** Frequently, interpreters are not well trained in the specifics and rationale of assessment procedures. Therefore, school psychologists or other specialists need to provide training and supervise all activities when working with interpreters. School districts should rely on trained interpreters and not enlist a cultural peer or a relative as the interpreter. Many language minority families already experience a reversal of roles with their children, which is reinforced if they are used as interpreters. Additionally, using lay interpreters (particularly other family members, relatives, or friends) risks breaching confidentiality. Because special educators tend to use a unique vocabulary, it is recommended that districts or state departments of education provide training and potentially certification in this specialized area of interpreting.

***Interpreters as cultural liaisons.*** When an interpreter is asked to provide information about cultural practices and expectations, he or she has taken on the role of a “cultural broker” or a “cultural liaison.” A cultural liaison is a person who has knowledge of the same racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or linguistic background as the family and is able to provide culturally specific information about the student. This information is extremely valuable in interpreting the data collected through the formal assessment process. However, school professionals should keep in mind that no one person can represent the entire culture and therefore multiple sources of data should be used.

## COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT

Native and English language assessments are essential for evaluating the learner's language development and understanding the relationship between a learner's language and academic performance.

***Rationale for communication assessment.*** Communication assessments are important because they may:

- Rule in or out a potential language disorder in the native language
- Provide evidence of the strength of native language skills, an important foundation for the development of English
- Explore the potential relevance of bilingual instruction, especially for newcomers and very limited English speakers
- Aid interpretation of data from other areas of assessment

***Culturally appropriate procedures for communication assessment.*** It is important to sample a variety of language functions, including vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. Although current assessment procedures sometimes allow for only broad conclusions regarding native language proficiency, this information may play a key role in determining educational disabilities and instructional needs. For some languages for which translated tests are available (such as Spanish), bilingual speech–language pathologists may administer instruments in both Spanish and English to determine bilingual status and development. For many other languages, the only option is to work with an appropriately trained native language interpreter using structured tasks to identify strengths and weaknesses about the learner’s language usage. Observing a student engaged in such activities as story comprehension, storytelling and retelling, memory for stories, and natural, informal conversation may be useful in gaining culturally fair and diagnostically useful information, even when interpreted from a strictly clinical rather than norm-referenced perspective. All data must be interpreted in light of a thorough language history.

## COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT

For ELL students, the goal of intellectual assessment is not to derive a standard score to plug into a discrepancy formula or other eligibility criteria. Even when modifying administration procedures, carefully selecting assessment tools, and using interpreters, educators must consider the validity of test results. Are findings consistent with everything else known about the individual?

***Using U.S. norms.*** Although the federal law (IDEA 2004) focuses on assessment in a student’s native language, problems with standardized cognitive measures are not solved by merely administering the tests in native language or by using interpreters. Both language and cultural knowledge influence test performance. Intelligence tests reflect the values and beliefs of the culture in which they were developed and thus suffer from cultural bias. Therefore, the individual’s degree of acculturation affects performance on these standardized measures. As noted above, the use of U.S. norms for evaluating the ELL student’s current functioning or predicting future performance may be inappropriate. In some circumstances, it may be possible only to rule out mental retardation and draw very tentative conclusions about the student’s range of functioning.

***Using nonverbal procedures.*** Some tasks on cognitive ability measures are more culturally loaded compared to others. The use of nonverbal measures may yield less discriminatory results for ELL students; however, some nonverbal measures also suffer from cultural bias, as they otherwise reflect mainstream cultural standards and experiences. Further, nonverbal measures of cognitive ability provide an incomplete picture of a student’s school learning potential. Tests such as the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT), the Leiter International Performance Scale, Revised (Leiter-R), and the nonverbal component of the Differential Ability Scales, 2nd edition (DAS-II) are preferred to such performance measures as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III Performance Scale, which have subtests with more cultural loading. Another measure, the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children, Second Edition (KABC-II), while not strictly a nonverbal instrument, minimizes verbal instructions and responses. These test items contain minimal cultural content and the examiner may exclude subtests which measure verbal ability; the KABC-II does include a nonverbal scale (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004).

***Bilingual scales.*** An increasing number of test instruments attempt to incorporate both native language and English in the evaluation of cognitive ability. The Bilingual Verbal Ability Tests

(BVAT; Muñoz-Sandoval, Cummins, Alvarado, & Ruef, 1998) is the only verbal intelligence test currently available in several other languages as well as English. While it consists of parts of the Woodcock-Johnson, Cognitive Battery–Revised (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989), it does not have separate norms for ELL students. Similar problems exist for the Broad Cognitive Ability-Bilingual Scale (BCA-Bil; Alvarado, 1999). These combinations of language-reduced tests and testing of verbal ability in the student’s native language represent advances in test design, but the norms do not take into account the impact of acculturation or dual language proficiency.

**Informal procedures.** Additional informal assessment procedures can yield useful data within a multidimensional, multitask approach to cognitive assessment. These include:

- Test–teach–test strategies (testing followed by teaching relevant skills to the student and then observing how quickly and accurately the student learns the skill)
- Testing of limits procedures (changing standardized procedures to observe student performance under different conditions)
- Interviews (of teachers, family, and student) and observations
- Assessment of adaptive functioning (evaluating the student’s self-sufficiency in dealing with daily living tasks; see discussion below)

## ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT

Academic assessment is a key component of the overall evaluation, as it directly reflects instructional needs.

**Impact of second language acquisition.** A major complication of academic assessment of ELL students is their varying stages of second language acquisition and academic experience. Understanding the specifics of their current and previous instructional programs is essential to accurate interpretation of ELL students’ academic performance. If a student has previously and recently received instruction in his or her native language, it will be important to assess those skills using appropriately trained bilingual staff to ensure that these competencies are not overlooked when all current instruction is in English. However, if a student has only received instruction in English, it is not useful to evaluate academic skills in the native language, unless he or she has been exposed to these skills at home or in community settings.

**Using norm referenced achievement tests.** The focus in academic assessment is generally on the skill areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, and to a lesser extent, the content areas (such as science and social studies). The more unique an individual’s educational experience and background, the more educators must individually tailor the assessment. Norm-referenced achievement tests are often not very useful in assessing ELLs because the norms do not adequately represent ELL populations. Further, test content does not adequately reflect ELL students’ instructional experience and test formats are often unfamiliar and confusing to the student.

Administering achievement tests in the native language may not improve the validity of the assessment if the curriculum is taught only in English. Norm-referenced tests can be used to determine what skills the student has or does not have, or is able to demonstrate in an English language environment, but it is not advisable to calculate or report standard scores.

**Curriculum-based measurement (CBM).** Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) provides a very systematic, research-based set of technically adequate procedures that can be used to make valid decisions about ELL students' achievement. Most importantly, these fluency-based measures of oral reading, written expression, and mathematics calculation/ application are sensitive to growth and can therefore monitor student progress in response to instruction (Elizalde-Utnick, 2008). CBMs also provide direct measures of the academic skill of concern, allowing error analyses on samples of the student's work to determine if linguistic or other factors may be affecting the student's performance.

Another useful application of CBMs is making normative comparisons of performance between a target student and appropriate peers based on locally collected district or school norms. More specific norms for particular groups of cultural and linguistic peers may also be derived and thus establish a standard for expected performance and progress in the curriculum. (See Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007, for more about CBM.)

**Other procedures.** Criterion referenced measures of achievement can also be used to collect more specific information about students' skill development, including information about what skills a student can demonstrate and at approximately what level. The Brigance Diagnostic Inventories (available in Spanish) are good examples and are useful in validating data gathered from more formal procedures to ensure consistency (Brigance & Messer, 1984). Systematic classroom observation and teacher interviews are also considered essential in the academic assessment of ELL students.

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT

When ELL students are referred for emotional or behavior problems, the team must first consider their stage of acculturation. Students who are undergoing the stresses of acculturation and accommodation to a new culture may present symptoms that can mimic disabilities or mental health disorders, but can be addressed with appropriate ESL and counseling services. Others who have experienced severe trauma may be in need of immediate identification and services.

**Multidimensional Data Sources.** Four approaches to EBD assessments include:

- Clinical child psychopathology evaluation by specialists in cultural differences
- Behavioral–environmental interaction analysis at home and school
- Functional behavioral analysis (FBA)
- Response to Intervention (RTI)

Behaviorally oriented procedures have the advantage of being most useful for intervention planning and less subject to bias. The use of normed rating scales as required to document a discrepancy from peers is problematic due to the fact that using interpreters to ensure parents understand the items changes the standardization. Rather, the school psychologist or other behavioral/mental health specialist must rely on multidimensional sources of data such as reviewing educational and screening history and completing parent and teacher interviews, student interviews, and several class room or school setting observations. Discrepancies in reports of a student's behavior across settings may reflect a situation where the student experiences acculturation stress at school, but not at home.

**Interviews.** High-quality parent interviews are essential for reducing bias in the EBD assessment process. Their purpose is not to convince the parents of the school's perception and level of discomfort with the student, but rather to gain information about the parents' understanding of their child's behavior and needs. Cultural beliefs and family stresses may affect the parents' ability to get involved in finding solutions to the problem. However, it is important to understand the context from which the student derives his or her identity, value system, and behavioral standards. Interview questions may include:

- Please tell me about your daily routines when you were pregnant with [the student]. Who took care of you? Did you work? Did you experience any health problems?
- Where was [the student] born, in a hospital, a clinic, or at home?
- How different or similar are his [native language skills, English, school achievement, social skills, behavior, and so on] when compared to his siblings and/or other relatives?
- Please tell me [the student's] daily routine after she gets out of bed in the morning. What does she like to do? Does she help you at home? Does she spend time with siblings or friends in the neighborhood?
- Have you any concerns about [the student's] health or past medical experiences?
- Do you have any other information you would like to share with us so that we can help [the student] do better at school?

**Observations.** Systematic observations are another important component of multidimensional assessment. In the context of direct observation, it may be possible to compare a student's classroom behaviors to those of peers with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When collected systematically and over several occasions, such peer comparison data may be more valid than rating scale data in describing the degree of difference in a student's presenting behaviors.

## ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONING ASSESSMENT

Adaptive functioning assessments are completed when the student is suspected of having a severe cognitive or developmental disability. Adaptive skills allow individuals to function and thrive within their physical and social environments. Examples of adaptive skills include daily living skills, work skills, and interpersonal relationships. Examining adaptive functioning to rule out intellectual disability is an important part of the evaluation of ELL students. According to federal definitions, if students have average adaptive functioning in their homes and communities, they would not meet the criteria for the educational diagnosis of cognitive delay at school.

Adaptive behaviors are contextual and vary from culture to culture. School psychologists and other assessment personnel must be conscientious about the relevance of the expectations they use as the comparison standard. Even when norm-referenced adaptive measures have been translated, this does not ensure that the items are culturally relevant or appropriate. For instance, young Asian male children may not button their clothing or tie their shoes because they expect their mothers to do it for them. This is just one example to illustrate that adaptive behaviors are culturally and experientially based. While the results of norm-referenced, standardized adaptive measures might be appropriate for program planning to help the students meet mainstream American expectations, by themselves these data would not be appropriately used to determine if students have an intellectual disability.



Culturally sensitive interviews with the parents, systematic observations of the student in natural settings that focus on comparisons with cultural peers, and consideration of the family's belief system all provide a framework for interpretation. The goal is to identify culturally appropriate and acceptable behaviors and then determine the extent to which the student meets these expectations.

## SUMMARY

Prior to initiating a nondiscriminatory assessment of an ELL student, school personnel should implement careful screening and appropriate classroom instructional and behavioral interventions. Further, before planning a formal assessment, educators must gather information through interviews with parents, teachers, and the student; through classroom observations; and through the collection of educational, developmental, and medical histories. Examining progress monitoring data to determine the student's response to research-based quality interventions will be most informative.

Once an assessment for special education eligibility is underway, each procedure should have multiple components and be conducted with modifications and cautions appropriate to the individual student. All of the information collected should be integrated and interpreted by the assessment team to ensure the most nonbiased conclusions possible. Practices that address students' performance in the context of their culture and language backgrounds and their response to appropriate instruction will help ensure fair, effective, and efficient assessment and intervention procedures for ELL students.

## REFERENCES

- Alvarado, C. G. (1999). *A Broad Cognitive Ability Bilingual Scale for the WJ-R Tests of Cognitive Ability and the Bateria Woodcock-Munoz Pruebas de Habilidad Cognitiva—Revisada* (Research Report Number 2), Itasca, IL: Riverside.
- Brigance, A. H., & Messer, P. (1984). *Brigance Diagnostic Assessment of Basic Skills: Spanish edition*. North Billerica, MA: Curriculum Associates.
- Elizalde-Utnick, G. (2008, November). *Using the response to intervention framework with English language learners*. *Communique*, 37(3), 18–21. National Association of School Psychologists. Available: [http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq373rti\\_ell.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq373rti_ell.aspx)
- Hosp, M. K., Hosp, J. L., & Howell, K. W. (2007). *The ABCs of CBM: A practical guide to curriculum-based measurement*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kaufman, A. S., & Kaufman, N. L. (2004) *Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children, Second Edition* (KABC-II). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education
- Lau, M. Y., & Blatchley, L. A. (2009). A comprehensive, multidimensional approach to assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In J. M. Jones (Ed.), *The psychology of multiculturalism in the schools: A primer for practice, training, and research*. (pp. 139–171). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Muñoz-Sandoval, A. F., Cummins, J., Alvarado, C. G., & Ruef, M. L. (1998). *Bilingual verbal abilities tests*. Rolling Meadows, IL: Riverside.
- Woodcock, R. W., & Johnson, M. B. (1989). *Woodcock- Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery—Revised. Tests of Cognitive Ability*. Allen, TX: DLM.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Deno, S. L. (2005). Curriculum-based measurement: Development and extensions. In B. G. Cook & B. R. Schirmer (Eds.), *What is special about special education: Examining the role of evidence-based practice* (pp. 1–30). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Esquivel, G. B., Lopez, E. C., & Nahari, S. (2007). *Handbook of multicultural school psychology: An interdisciplinary perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gersten, R., & Baker, S. (2000). What we know about effective instructional practices for English-language learners. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 454–70.
- Ortiz, S. O. (2008). Best practices in nondiscriminatory assessment. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 666–678). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Rhodes, R. L., Ochoa, S. H., & Ortiz, S. O. (2005). *Assessing culturally and linguistically diverse students: A practical guide*. New York, Guilford Press.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. Berkley, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, University of California. Available:  
<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/65j213pt?display=all>

---

Lionel A. Blatchley, PhD, is recently retired as a school psychologist and ELL specialist with the St. Paul Public Schools. Matthew Y. Lau, PhD, NCSP, is a school psychologist and research specialist with the Minneapolis Public Schools. This handout is a preprint from *Helping Children at Home and School III* (NASP, in press).

© 2010 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, (301) 657-0270, Fax (301) 657-0275