

**SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS
BEST PRACTICES IN GENERAL EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS
AND COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATIONS OF ENGLISH
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

Prepared by the Bilingual Assessment Committee
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I. Introduction

Becoming proficient in the assessment of children whose primary language is other than English is a challenging but necessary goal for preassessment committees and Child Study Teams. The existence of a steadily increasing number of English language learners demands that practitioners rise to the task of treating these students fairly and in a manner that acknowledges the significant impact of cultural and linguistic variables on their learning. Evaluation procedures designed for monolingual, mainstream populations often are inappropriate for use with these children. This being the case, the following can help psychologists as they analyze the school-related problems of these children: Knowing at the outset that preassessment and evaluation of these students is very time consuming and subject to a plethora of confounding variables, and acknowledging that some degree of academic struggle is normal for them. Knowing whom to call for consultation/assistance and being willing to do so can facilitate the process. Also very important is a willingness to gather and examine descriptive data obtained by observation, interview, work samples, and so on, keeping in mind that traditional tests can be of limited value due to a poor fit between the student and the normative group. Generally, one should strive to obtain a sample of the student's best performance and incorporate a number of opportunities for the individual to show knowledge in a variety of areas. Only through the flexible use of both traditional and nontraditional procedures can meaningful assessments and interventions for these children emerge.

2. Assessment Areas

A. Mental Ability

1. *Nonverbal* mental ability assessment instruments:
 - a. **Differential Ability Scales (DAS) Nonverbal Scale**
 - ii. **Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children III (WISC-III) Performance Scale**

- iii. **Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC) Nonverbal**
- iv. **Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence (C-TONI)**
- v. **Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT)**

- ii. Assessing *verbal* ability:

If appropriate, attempt mental ability testing in English; use a bilingual evaluator to test in the child's first language, if possible, and when appropriate.

Use informal assessment techniques (see IV. A. below)

- i. **Consult with teachers (regular, ESOL), multidisciplinary team members, and parents**
- ii. **Use "estimates" rather than exact scores when appropriate**
- iii. **Remember that achievement is highly correlated with verbal intelligence, so evidence of average or above average achievement in any subject may indicate average to above average verbal ability.**

In assessing students with limited English proficiency, psychologists may be tempted to rely solely on nonverbal measures. Although nonverbal mental ability tests play an important role in any evaluation, verbal ability must be assessed for these students. Consider the English-only speaking child whose verbal IQ score is significantly higher or lower than his nonverbal score: the verbal score can make the difference in program eligibility considerations. Failure to assess verbal intelligence for a bilingual child is discriminatory and is likely to lead to ill-informed placement decisions. Bear in mind that learning to speak two or more languages requires verbal intelligence.

Most verbal ability measures available to us were normed on monolingual populations. Scores from such tests must be interpreted with extreme caution! A significantly lower verbal score *does not necessarily mean that verbal ability is lower than nonverbal ability; in fact, verbal ability may be a strength!* In addition, since it is unusual for bilingual children to have verbal ability test scores which are significantly higher than nonverbal ability on such tests, the possibility of a visual-spatial processing deficit should be thoroughly investigated, when this occurs.

b. Achievement testing

Attempt achievement testing in English; use a bilingual evaluator to test in the child's first language if possible and when appropriate. (Note: Bateria-R Achievement Test can be given in Spanish by an ancillary examiner.)

- 0. Achievement scores may be depressed if the subject (reading, math, writing) being tested was taught in another language; in this case, a seemingly "severe discrepancy" may be due to the student's lack of exposure to the subject in English.
 - i. Scores may also be depressed if the child's English proficiency was limited while she was being taught the subject in this country.
 - ii. If a child's first language is other than English, speeded verbal test scores may be depressed due to his need to mentally translate.
 - iii. Since math calculation is relatively independent of language proficiency, average to high scores in basic math skills can be important clue in assessing academic achievement and learning potential.

c. Processing testing

- 0. Development Test of Visual-Motor Integration (VMI)

- i. K-ABC
 - ii. Visual-Aural Digit Span (VADS) if child is familiar with English numerals
 - iii. Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability
 - iv. Bender (and Bender Memory) used as adjunct measure
- d. **Adaptive behavior**
- 0. Be aware of varying cultural expectations of children
 - i. Recognize the impact of limited English proficiency on communication and socialization domains in the classroom.

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3. Consideration of Language Proficiency and Test Selection Criteria

There are various measures and methods to determine a student's level of English proficiency, which will then determine subsequent assessment procedures and interpretive considerations. ESOL teachers will typically have scores available from the Language Assessment Scales (LAS). On a scale of 0 to 5:

- 0. 0 Responses "entirely in language other than English" or "I don't know" responses
 - 1 Contains only "isolated words, expressions, or verbal rituals ("Good morning", "How are you?")
 - 2 Responses which relate to the prompt but "are difficult to associate with the story line"
 - 3 Responses "that contain errors in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, or usage not likely to be made by proficiency speakers of standard American English"
 - 4 Responses in "coherent, fluent sentences" with errors "not uncommon among proficient speakers of standard American English"
 - 5 "Fluent, articulate" responses typical of "articulate, proficient speakers of American English"

The Bilingual Verbal Ability Test (B-VAT) gives standard scores and age-equivalents for English Language Proficiency and Bilingual Verbal Ability. It also indicates "Cognitive Academic Language" (CALP) or "literacy-related aspects of language", as opposed to "Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills" (BICS). This measure was normed on a bilingual population in the United States and gives students an opportunity to answer questions first in English and then in their first language. It can be administered by an English-speaking psychologist with an ancillary examiner. It is available in 16 languages.

- F. ***If English is clearly dominant, follow assessment protocol with English tests, bearing in mind that:***
- 0. Verbal scores may be depressed since certain vocabulary may have been learned in a language other than English.
 - i. Achievement scores may be depressed if the subject being tested was taught in another language or if the subject was taught before the child was English-proficient enough to learn it; in these cases, a seemingly "severe discrepancy" may be due to the student's lack of exposure to the subject in English.
 - ii. If a child's first language is other than English, speeded verbal test scores will likely be depressed due to his need to mentally translate. An example of a speeded verbal subtest is "Written Expression" on the WIAT. In such a case, testing of the limits may be appropriate.
- g. ***If there is little or no English, test with measures normed on a monolingual population in the student's first language, if possible. If a bilingual evaluator is not***

available, use nonverbal measures, informal assessment techniques and appropriate non-standard procedures (section IV).

- h. **For students with mixed dominance, select an assessment battery based on the individual needs and history of the student.**
- 0. Use bilingual evaluators when available.
 - i. Use nonverbal measures, informal assessment techniques and non-standard procedures as appropriate.
 - ii. Interpret all verbal ability and achievement scores with the cautions listed throughout this document.

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4. **Assessment Issues and Techniques for Limited English Proficient Students**

Informal assessment techniques

- 0. Interviews with student, teachers, parents, etc.
 - i. Observations
 - ii. Thorough review of records
 - iii. Classroom tests and work samples
 - iv. Extracurricular activities and interests
 - v. Dynamic assessment (test-teach-test)
 - vi. Comparison with typical bilingual peer
- a. ***Use of appropriate non-standard procedures***
- 0. Any modification in test administration must be documented and clearly discussed in the psychologist's report.
 - i. Modifications in administration other than those specified in the test manual violates standardization criteria and invalidates the use of normative comparisons.
 - ii. Testing a bilingual child with measures normed on monolingual populations violates standardization criteria and invalidates the use of normative comparisons.
 - iii. Testing the limits
 - . **Allowing extra time for speeded verbal items**
 - i. **Dynamic testing**
 - ii. **Substitution of dialectally/culturally appropriate vocabulary**
 - iii. **Deletion/modification of culturally inappropriate items**
 - iv. **Explicit instruction, beyond that allowed in administration criteria and use of practice items.**
 - v. **Dual scoring of test protocols, both with and without modifications**
 - vi. **Probing for reasons for responses**
 - vii. **Translation**

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5. **Characteristics of the English Language Learner with a Disability**

Distinguishing between the English language learner who is experiencing temporary academic difficulty due to limited English skills and the handicapped English language learner is usually at the heart of the preassessment/assessment issue. The referral of a student to special education should occur only when all other avenues have been pursued, and when the school is convinced that the child's needs cannot be met in regular education. There should be adequate evidence

that the problem is not caused by inconsistent educational experiences, a poor fit between teacher and child, or other external educational variables.

There should be documentation of pervasiveness: The child's problems should occur across settings and in both languages. Concluding that the latter is true can be difficult as some children may have lost some of their first language skills, or may not have developed first language skills fully, yet this issue should be addressed. The identification process is simpler with the handicapped child who has an obvious innate problem such as severe mental retardation; it is the child with milder learner problems that presents a greater challenge. As one looks at the characteristics of the child, one should remember that cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and other background conditions are not considered handicapping conditions.

Difficulties often are evident in both languages, and in one or more of these language skills areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The student may have difficulty processing language, not comprehending oral input and appearing puzzled when questioned. He may respond with irrelevant responses or garbled speech. An auditory memory or auditory processing deficit may be apparent in his confusion over auditory input or difficulty with the retrieval of words/information. Consultation with a speech clinician is recommended when auditory skills are being assessed.

Other students may display visual deficits that affect their reading or written work: inadequate spacing between words and many misspellings. Little symbol-sound association may exist between the written word and the work intended (in spite of appropriate instruction), or the student may have difficulty writing on the line and with the discrimination of the size of letters. Of course, the difficulties experienced by some of these students may not be entirely language based. Referral to special education may also be necessary for emotional, cognitive, neurological or sensorial reasons.

Once the student has been identified as having an innate learning problem, he should be referred to a special education program that will allow him to develop the skills necessary for full participation in society. Distinguishing between special education children and those who are experiencing temporary difficulties due to limited English skills can be difficult, but is crucial, as inappropriate referral to special education can be stigmatizing to the child, dilute the services available to children truly in need, and inhibit the English language learner from achieving his full potential.

It is imperative that the General Education Support Team (GEST), (formerly PIT), involve the school social worker as a consultant. Whether paras or other persons are utilized as interpreter's social workers are trained to obtain the information necessary to help determine whether referral for a comprehensive evaluation is appropriate. Social workers can assist in the GEST process as follows:

Verify PIF Information:

0. Birth dates may be misunderstood: 6-8-95 could be June 8th or the 6th of August.
 - Last names may be misinterpreted; maiden names are picked up by the computer, even though parents are married
 - Home language may be incorrectly listed; correct paperwork depends upon accurate information

Obtain the services of an interpreter, if necessary. (See social work component for details)

Remind staff that each individual's own cultural background influences his/her perception of others and affects the interaction/communication process between staff and family.

Obtain information from the family regarding:

Cultural and Linguistic Background

3. Specifics of family's language usage--what language is used between parents, parent and child, child to child, extended family and friends?
 - Specifics of child's language usage--understanding, speaking, reading, writing of first language; any delays or difficulties in first language usage? Does the child use English? With whom? Does the child continue to use the first language? With whom?
 - Does the child ask peers for assistance in understanding?
 - Parental education, literacy in own language?
 - Specifics of cultural differences--how are they different from mainstream America? Does the culture value support of family/group over individual effort? What ethnic group do they identify with?
 - How does the child's cognitive learning style differ from the teacher's?
 - How does the child's learning strategies help or hinder his/her success in class?
 - How does the child's learning ability/problem and comparison with siblings and peers?

Acculturation Level

11. Which generation of the family was the first to arrive in the US?
 - How much does the child/family interact with mainstream peers or cultural group?
 - Do they display heightened stress or anxiety in cross-cultural interactions?
 - Do they express or display a sense of isolation or alienation in cross-cultural interactions?

Experiential Background

15. Specifics regarding education experience--How much time was actually spent in school? How much time was missed between schools? What language(s) was used in school? Exactly what was studied there? How well did the child do?
 - Did the previous school use similar materials? Expect similar behavior? Use similar terms/concepts for subject areas or materials or content?
 - Is the child continuing to use survival strategies, which are no longer appropriate?
 - Health factors that might influence learning?

Determining need for assistance:

The school social worker must determine if there is a need for a translator, interpreter, and/or cultural mediator. An interpreter translates documents; interprets for meetings with parents; explains cultural aspects important for interacting with and understanding family.

Paperwork must be in the parents' primary language, unless they request English, in which case the request needs to be documented. Staff may think parents understand English, but their English language comprehension may be too limited to understand the parents' rights and other legal documents.

If the social worker speaks the child/family's native language but is of a different culture, or if the child is a native English speaker of a different culture, then a cultural mediator should be consulted.

When social worker requests the Notice/Consent, 10-day letter, and Parents' Rights in the appropriate language from Bob Goodwin's office, ask if there is also an information sheet available for the appropriate culture.

Preparing your interpreter or mediator:

19. Have any written material translated before meeting with parents.
 - If certain documents cannot be prepared ahead of time, write down key phrases that you know you will need and have them translated ahead of time.
 - Think about items that you may ask about that are culturally different and advise your interpreter ahead of time about these items. For example, common phrases that infants use as they begin speech or simple games that children play at various stages of development.
 - If you are unfamiliar with the culture, tell the interpreter and ask them to advise you if you are asking something inappropriate or in an inappropriate way. If you are doing a home visit, ask for any specific rules of etiquette that you may need to follow. Ask in a general way about the culture, and be sure you let the interpreter know if you are needing them to act as a cultural mediator or not. Be specific in your expectations of them, particularly in regard to frequency of interpretation and their ability to simply answer a parent's questions directly.
 - Explain to the interpreter what your goals are in the interview and what kind of items you may be asking about.
 - Ask the interpreter to avoid significantly changing the meaning when interpreting and/or influencing the child of family by expressing judgment or opinions.

Conducting the interview:

25. Always go to the interview with the interpreter, if possible, or make sure they arrive at the same time you do. When the appointment is made, have the interpreter ask where the parents prefer to meet, as some parents may not wish to have persons in their home who might not understand their ways.
 - Speak in one thought at a time to allow the interpreter to keep up with what you're saying. If the interviewee talks rapidly and you feel that you interpreter may lose some of the information, attempt to interrupt to allow the interpreter to convey the information.
 - When reviewing parent's rights, be especially cognizant of special circumstances. Rights can feel intimidating for anyone, but especially for illegal aliens and perhaps for persons who are here as political refugees. Make the rights as friendly and positive as possible. Try to stress the empowerment of parents rather than the legal system.
 - Remember to allow plenty of time for the interview.
 - If you know a few words in the native language, use them if possible.
 - If there is more than one person who speak the same language, you may need to referee to make certain that everything gets translated. Don't hold a private conversation with another person while the interpreter is speaking.
 - Use clear and straightforward language with specific examples of behavior, avoiding technical jargon, idioms, and colloquial expressions that may be difficult to translate. Speak in short, simple sentences and avoid passive voice and other complex grammatical construction. Realize that the interpreter will re-state your comments in a different way, not in the exact way you state it.
 - Assume the parents are listening and may understand some things in English.
 - If you need to ask something in a particularly tactful way, explain your goal to the interpreter. For example, "I need to know if the parent understands their child's disability. Please ask them if they feel their child is just a normal kid or if they feel their problems are different from other children."
 - Address most of your comments to the interviewee, not the interpreter. Do this to establish a relationship and maximize your ability to read non-verbal communication. Be sure to check out your culture bound observations.

Completing the social history:

The social history should include all the usual data. In addition, workers need to explore the following:

35. What are the child and the family's cultural orientation, language, customs, religious identification and practice, and generation of immigration? Are there intergenerational differences?
 - What are the child and family's ethnic/cultural views regarding the cause of and solutions to problems?
 - What is the child and family's class and ethnic group membership? What is the status of this group in the larger society? Is there discrimination against this group? Is there an ethnic support network?
 - Is the child motivated by competitive or cooperative activities, individual or group rewards?
 - Are words or gesture and facial expressions more important?
 - Do parents expect the school to know and do all, or do they feel they should have influence?
 - Does the child depend totally upon the teacher, or does he/she learn independently; does he/she volunteer, argue with teacher?
 - Is it more stressful to the child and his/her family for the child to fail academically or to be socially isolated?
 - Is the child's behavior culturally appropriate at home, in the child's neighborhood, at school?
 - Do apparent developmental delays, based upon school standards, reflect true individual delays or differing cultural expectations? Examples:
 - Withdrawn, quiet child--might be in the pre-production phase of learning a new language, might be demonstrating cultural values of respect, deference, reflection, and listening.
 - Aggressive, impulsive, non-compliant or disrespectful-appearing child--might be exhibiting cultural values of independence and self-reliance; might have had a history of self-protection and self-sufficiency.
 - Disorganized, poorly sequenced, disheveled, or inconsiderate-appearing child--might have emerging self-care skills appropriate to his culture; might be undergoing stress from adaptation, family trauma, or change.

The school social worker is responsible for obtaining family information necessary to ensure that cultural differences are not used as the basis upon which to place a "different" student into special education.

After the interview:

Debrief with the interpreter after the interaction, sharing feedback on the process of interpreting, as well as the interview itself, regarding any difficulties that arose. Ask for "cultural interpretations" of any situation that might have been misunderstood during the interaction. Review your overall impressions of the interview to make certain that your interpreter concurs. Examine your ideas of resistance if you felt this during the interview. Avoid assuming that parents who do not give you all the information you request are being hostile or uncaring. Some cultures do not share private family information.