SPECIAL EDUCATION GUIDANCE

Best Practices When Assessing English Learners

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Introduction

This resource was created as a reference to accompany the two recorded presentations by Courtney Seidel, M.S., CCC-SLP entitled, "Best Practices When Assessing English Learners". It will guide you through portions of Seidel's structured approach to assess a student who is in grades K-12 and has been identified through the standardized procedure as an English Learner (EL). Professionals outside of education often use synonymous terms such as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) or dual language learner (DLL). This resource is also appropriate to

utilize when assessing preschoolers who are learning two or more languages but may not yet carry an EL designation.

The structured approach is chronological and intended to begin early in the problem-solving process, starting with "Initial Considerations". If the initial phase reveals that it is warranted to continue the monitoring or assessment process, the team proceeds to the "Global Considerations" phase, which embraces evidence-based research regarding the natural process of second language acquisition. Next, additional "Individual Considerations" are considered which factors in details related to the student's home language, culture, and other factors unique to the student. This process culminates in a comprehensive assessment of language, for which two culturally and linguistically responsive methods are described.

Utilizing this structured approach may occur prior to referral for an evaluation for special education or as part of the review of existing data for students who are being evaluated for special education and should not unnecessarily delay a referral if someone suspects a student to be a student with a disability. Additionally, to ensure that the pre-referral process does not become an informal review of existing data, the process should be universal by problem-solving teams supporting all students.

Initial Considerations

Red Flags for a Language Disorder in English Learners

What is this? Kathryn Kohnert summarizes four, reliable, evidence-based red flags for a language disorder in English Learners (Kohnert 2014).
1. Slow acquisition of English, with loss or stagnancy of the home language
2. Parent concern
3. Positive family history for a communication disorder
4. Informed teacher concern (i.e., a teacher trained in second language acquisition)

Why is this best practice for ELs? Using these red flags as initial considerations increases the team's confidence with proceeding toward a referral for special education services. These red flags also ensure that teams are gathering appropriate and adequate amounts of information before writing a referral.

Many professionals report uncertainty regarding the appropriate time to refer English Learners. Some schools fear that they might be referring English Learners too quickly and that time is needed for a student to learn English before a referral for special education services is made (Zacarian 2011). This "wait till the student fails" and "stall for time" approach, can prevent the interventions that are needed from occurring (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, and Young 2003). On the other hand, some schools stall the process for such a long period of time that when the referral

finally occurs, it is too late to provide the types of interventions that would have helped the student the most effectively, if at all (Esparza Brown and Doolittle 2008).

How to get started: When concerns initially arise regarding an English Learner's language abilities, gather the necessary information to answer whether these four red flags apply to the student. Parent or family report and examination of any existing ACCESS testing can help answer the first red flag. When seeking parent or family feedback for red flags two and three, be sure to enlist the help of an interpreter if needed. Ensure that the teacher's concern stems from someone who is trained in the second language acquisition process; this is typically an English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingually certified teacher.

Global Considerations

Before assuming that the student's difficulties with language are rooted in disability, it is important to consider what is typical during second language acquisition.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

What is this? There are different timelines for learning social and academic language. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are those skills required for social communication and are acquired first by English Learners because they are rich in context. BICS are usually acquired within 2 years of being regularly exposed to a language. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are those skills required for academic learning. The content is new and unfamiliar, and less information can be derived from context. Therefore, CALP is learned exclusively from the language, not situational cues. CALP may take 5-7 years or longer to achieve (Hill and Björk 2008).

Why is this best practice for ELs? Being aware of the normal processes that accompany learning a second language will increase your confidence and competence in accurately identifying English Learners with a disability (Roseberry-McKibbin and Brice 2019).

How to get started: Consider the length of time the student has been exposed to English as well as the student's most recent English language proficiency results, if available, and gauge your expectations accordingly. Discuss the timeline of BICS and CALP with teachers and team members to set realistic expectations for the student's use and understanding of English in the classroom. Reflect on whether the student is expected to have achieved CALP, and whether this is the area that most of the team's concerns reside.

Stages of Language Acquisition

What is this? Like the developmental milestones that professionals frequently refer to for monolingual English-speaking students, all students acquiring English will pass through these

normal stages of development. The five stages of language acquisition, along with the characteristics and approximate time frames are provided below (Hill and Björk 2008).

Stage	Characteristics	Approximate Time Frame
Stage I Pre-Production	No speech Minimal comprehension BICS	0 – 6 months
Stage II Early Production	1–2-word responses Mispronounces words BICS	6 months - 1 year
Stage III Speech Emergence	Simple sentences Grammar errors BICS	1 - 3 years
Stage IV Intermediate	Complex sentences Discourse BICS/CALP	3 - 5 years
Stage V Advanced	Native-like vocabulary Complex narration BICS/CALP	5 - 7 years

Why is this best practice for ELs? One of the most important characteristics of each English Learner is which stage of acquisition they are in. Knowing and understanding the stage and its characteristics are critical for effectively differentiating a language difference from a disorder. Krashen and Terrell's work outlined above linked classroom activities with the stages of language acquisition to ensure that teachers did not expect skills from English Learners that were beyond their stages of acquisition (Hill and Björk 2008).

How to get started: The stage of language acquisition chart offers the opportunity for the speech-language pathologist and an educator with foundational knowledge in first and second language instruction and second language acquisition to collaborate and explore together the additional characteristics associated with each stage. Like BICS and CALP, consider the student's anticipated stage of language acquisition and gauge expectations accordingly. Discuss the stages with teachers and team members to set realistic expectations for the student's use and understanding of English in the classroom. Reflect on whether the student's current skill sets are aligned with their expected stage of language acquisition, which would reflect a language difference and not a disorder.

ACCESS Scores

What is this? ACCESS is a standards-based, criterion-referenced test of English language proficiency that is taken annually by English Learners in grades K-12. It assesses social-

instructional and academic areas of speaking, reading, writing, and listening. 2.1 million students across 36 states take the ACCESS test annually (WIDA Assessment n.d.). ACCESS scores are a global consideration because they provide educators with general performance expectations based on the student's level of English language proficiency.

Why is this best practice for ELs? An English Learner should not be expected to demonstrate academic skills that supersede their level of English acquisition. ACCESS scores offer the professional a gold mine of information regarding the student's ability to use English academically. ACCESS scores are also important to consider because they use bilingual expectations (versus comparison to monolingual English expectations).

How to get started: Teams should consider ACCESS scores early in the problem-solving process to determine if the student is performing as expected based on their English language proficiency (i.e., if their performance in the classroom aligns with the descriptions provided for their ACCESS scores, then the student is functioning in their zone of proximal development and a referral for special education services is likely not warranted).

Scores on the ACCESS test range from 1-6 (see below) and proficiency level descriptors are provided for each area of speaking, reading, writing, and listening in the [WIDA Interpretive Guide for Score Reports](WIDA 2022). The speech-language pathologist and an educator with foundational knowledge in first and second language instruction and second language acquisition should collaborate and explore this resource together to examine the student's ACCESS scores in detail before considering a referral for special education services. Problem-solving teams should consider, *"Are we expecting this student to perform ABOVE their English language proficiency level?"*

ACCESS Score Interpretation:
Individual Student Report: Contains detailed information about a student's performance on each section of ACCESS and shows a proficiency level and a scale score for each of the four language domains.

Proficiency Level: Describes the student's performance in terms of the six WIDA English Language Proficiency Levels listed below and can be used to make comparisons across domains but not across grades.
1. Entering
2. Emerging
3. Developing
4. Expanding
5. Bridging
6. Reaching

Scaled Score: Precisely track student growth over time and across grades and by taking into account differences in item difficulty, they place all students on a single continuum that stretches

from kindergarten through grade 12. Allow you to compare student performance across grades, within each domain, with more granularity than you will see with proficiency levels.

Student Roster Report: Contains information on a group of students within a single school and grade and can be used to verify that student scores reflect reasonable expectations. For example, you can expect that students new to an English language school context or who have had limited or interrupted formal schooling will be at the lower end of the scale.

Individual Considerations

After considering what is typical during second language acquisition, the team progresses to exploration of individual considerations, as well as cultural, linguistic, and dialectical factors unique to the student.

Can Do Descriptors

What is this? Can Do Descriptors align with the student's ACCESS scores to provide us with detailed, individualized considerations regarding their use of English academically. They highlight what language learners *can do* at various stages of language proficiency. Like the ACCESS scores, the Can Do Descriptors provide these expectations across the different content areas of speaking, reading, writing, and listening (WIDA 2022).

Why is this best practice for DLLs? Can Do Descriptors are valid, reliable, and very individualized because they compare English Learners to bilingual, age or grade level expectations, based on the student's own English language proficiency level (i.e., ACCESS scores). The Can Do Descriptors relate to the English Language Development Standards Statements. This free resource helps educators better understand what students at different levels of language proficiency can do with language (WIDA 2022).

How to get started: Identify the Can Do Descriptors for the student's age or grade level. Note that Can Do Descriptors are also available for the "Early Years", ages 2.5-5.5. On the rubric, circle or highlight the skills that correspond to the student's ACCESS score for that specific area. Observe the student or interview teachers (or both) to determine if the student is able to demonstrate the Can Do Descriptors that align with their age or grade and ACCESS scores. If the student is able to demonstrate skills outlined, the student is functioning in the classroom at their expected level of English proficiency. Use the Can Do Descriptors to appropriately gauge expectations for the student and consider, *"Are we expecting this student to perform ABOVE their English language proficiency level?"*

Assessment Procedures

After completing the initial considerations (i.e., red flags), the global considerations (i.e., BICS and CALP, stages of language acquisition, ACCESS scores), and the individual considerations (i.e., Can Do Descriptors), the team will have plentiful information to determine whether a referral for special education services is warranted. If the team determines a special education evaluation is warranted, they should proceed with the following recommendations *after* the preceding steps have been completed. The information collected should clearly indicate that the concerns are *not* due to a language difference.

- **All evaluations for special education services must be significantly comprehensive to determine:**
    - Whether the child is a child with a disability,
    - The content of the child's IEP, including information related to enabling the child to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum or age-appropriate activities. 34 CFR 300.304(b)(1)

    In addition, Wisconsin's rule for speech or language impairment disability category identification requires the IEP team to consider the student's age, culture, language background, and dialect prior to determining whether or not the student has a speech or language impairment.

- **Approach:** Shift from assessing isolated skills to exploring the student's overall capacity to learn via language processing abilities (e.g., processing speed, working memory, language learnability, etc.). Two ways this can be done include dynamic assessment and nonword repetition.

Dynamic Assessment

What is this? Dynamic assessment is an assessment strategy that enables examiners to assess student's language learning capabilities and their responsiveness to good language learning experiences within a very short period of time (Gillam and Peña 2004). This is commonly achieved by using the test-teach-retest method. IEP team members are encouraged to learn more about dynamic assessment by accessing the following DPI resources and trainings:

Incorporating Dynamic Assessment into Evaluations Recorded Presentation
Dynamic Assessment: DPI Written Guidance
Dynamic Assessment: DPI Guidance Tool

Why is this best practice for ELs? Dynamic assessment is proven to reduce bias toward culturally and linguistically diverse students *and* to assess their ability to learn language. It reduces biases inherent in typical static assessments of language ability (i.e., norm-referenced tests; Orellana et al. 2019) and provides evidence to distinguish impairments from differences and lack of exposure (Gutiérrez-Clellen and Peña 2001).

How to get started: Dynamic assessment protocols are available for clinicians, such as this Dynamic Assessment Protocol from Bilinguistics. These protocols guide you through selecting an area of difficulty that has been identified, collecting a baseline measure, implementing a mediated learning experience, and collecting post-data.

Nonword Repetition

What is this? Nonword repetition is an auditory task where an evaluator produces a nonword, and the student repeats it back (Kester 2020).

Why is this best practice for ELs? Nonword repetition may seem simple, but it actually requires the skills necessary for language learning, including: auditory processing, working memory, and organization of articulatory output. To complete nonword repetition tasks, the individual must first perceive the set of sounds, encode the set of sounds, remember the set of sounds, assemble the sounds for production, and finally articulate them (Kester 2020). Furthermore, the evidence-base for using nonword repetition with a student who is culturally and linguistically diverse is very strong:

- Nonword repetition accurately distinguishes between children with and without language impairments (Dollaghan 1998).
- Spanish-English speaking children with language impairments perform significantly worse than their non-impaired peers on tasks of nonword repetition (Gutiérrez-Clellen and Simon-Cereijido 2010).
- Nonword repetition is found to be effective with children who speak English, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, French, & Mandarin (Paradis et al. 2013).
- Nonword repetition obtained a 94% sensitivity rating with Spanish-English bilingual speaking children (Windsor et al. 2010).
- Using nonword repetition tasks in your assessments is less biased towards diverse populations by minimizing bias due to socioeconomic status and parent education level (Dollaghan 1998) as well as bias related to life experiences, socialization practices, and literacy skills (Laing and Kahmi 2003).

How to get started: Nonword repetition tasks, including word lists and instructions for administration and scoring, are available in English and Spanish from the LEADERS Project. Note that administering nonword repetition tasks in BOTH English and Spanish increases this tool's sensitivity to 95% (Gutiérrez-Clellen and Simon-Cereijido 2010). When scoring nonword repetition tasks, calculate the percent phonemes correct (PPC). A PPC of 70% or lower would be adequate to rule in the presence of a language disorder in a school-age student. A PPC of 81% or greater rules out a language impairment (Dollaghan 1998).

Nonword repetition can be used with students who speak any language and evaluators may create their own word lists; when this occurs, they should be mindful of phonotactic constraints.

Nonwords should be formed in a way that aligns with the student's home language. For example, some sounds from English may not be in the home language, they may not be in that position of the word in the home language, or certain combinations may not exist in the home language. Lastly, do not use nonword repetition tasks from standardized assessments for English Learners. These tests are typically created using the phonotactics of English and it is unlikely that the English Learner will align with the normative data sample.

In summary, this structured approach to assessing English Learners ensures that the clinician utilizes evidence-based, best practices for a culturally and linguistically responsive special education evaluation. It promotes a thorough pre-referral process for English Learners and assessment processes that minimize bias and over-identification.

To learn about the additional toolkit items not addressed here, and to further address each phase in Seidel's structured approach to assessing the language of English Learners, email courtneylaneseidel@gmail.com to inquire about upcoming professional development opportunities or direct consultation.

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