# Criterion-Referenced Assessments for Language

Criterion-referenced assessments "are...tests [and procedures] that measure an individual's performance against a set of predetermined criteria or performance standards (e.g., descriptions of what an individual is expected to know or be able to do at a specific stage of development or level of education)" (ASHA n.d.) and may be either standardized or more informal, clinician-developed in nature. These assessments have a more narrow focus of content when compared to norm-referenced assessments and often have a percentage, mastery/non mastery or pass/fail result. A student would be scored as "pass" if a particular skill was mastered and as "fail" if they did not demonstrate mastery of the content. "In educational settings, criterion-referenced tests may be used to assess whether the student has learned a specific body of knowledge. It is possible, and in fact desirable, for an individual to pass or earn a perfect score on a criterion-referenced test" (ASHA n.d.).

Criterion-referenced assessments grew out of a need for better assessment methods. Norm-referenced tests were found to be inadequate for determining present levels of performance and identifying targets for intervention. They also have limited utility when a student is not represented in the normative sample due to their cultural and linguistic background (McCauley 1996). Criterion-referenced assessments include (but are not limited to) language sample analysis and mean length of utterance (MLU; McCauley 1996). "Criterion-referenced procedures can also be developed informally to address specific questions (e.g., understanding of wh- questions, automatic recognition of grade-appropriate words in print) and to assess response to intervention (RTI)" (ASHA n.d.). In addition, SLPs may utilize norm-referenced assessments as criterion-referenced assessments; in this situation, standard scores would not be reported but proficiency of specific skills would be reported.

The use of criterion-referenced assessments along with norm-referenced tests and other assessment methods (e.g., observation, review of work samples) would be considered best practice when considering a student for speech or language impairment.

## Published Criterion-Referenced Tests

Some criterion referenced tests are formally published (and may be purchased). These tests are often standardized and provide guidelines for interpreting performance.

However, they do not provide an index of relative standing (percentiles, standard scores). Ideally, these tests should have psychometric data available and should provide information on the appropriateness for use with all students, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Examples include (not an exhaustive list):

- The Rossetti Infant-Toddler Scale
- Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised
- Functional Communication Profile-Revised
- Ages & Stages Questionnaires
- Bracken School Readiness Assessment
- Focus on the Outcomes of Communication under Six

## Language Sample Analysis

Language Sample Analysis (LSA) is used as a criterion-referenced assessment. "The diagnostic accuracy of distinguishing a language difference from language impairment is substantially increased when LSA is used in conjunction with standardized [norm-referenced] testing" (Horton-Ikard 2010). The type of language sample elicited based on student age and area of concern and may include: play-based, conversation, narrative, expository, persuasive. Many recommended LSA protocols are structured and can be considered standardized (e.g., narrative retell).

For students who are learning language, Brown's Stages of Syntactic and Morphological Development may be meaningful and relevant to report (here is a link to an article by Dr. Caroline Bowen regarding Brown's Stages). The language skills of students with greater proficiency in language can also be compared to benchmarks provided in the literature (e.g., Heilmann & Malone 2014; Pavelko & Owens 2017; Overton et al. 2021). When using the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT), student performance can be automatically compared to benchmark data from a group of typically developing speakers. Pezold, Imgrund, and Storkel (2020) provide instructional guidance in their supplemental materials in using computer programs for language sample analysis and Heilmann et al. (2020) also include videos in their supplemental materials to support SLPs in elicitation of language samples.

In addition to traditional language sample measures (e.g., MLU, number of different words or NDW), language samples can be analyzed for use of specific language features (e.g., complex syntax, literate language) and for overall discourse skills (e.g., narrative organization/story grammar, expository organization skills, topic maintenance).

## Rubrics and Rating Scales from Research

Research articles often contain ratings and rubrics that can be used as a criterion referenced assessment. Some examples of rating scales include (must have ASHA account to log in to see full article):

- [Social Communication Coding System](#)
- [Analysis of Complex Syntax](#)
- [Literate Language Features](#)
- [Peer communication](#)

## Contextualized Tests

The Wisconsin Academic State Standards provide multiple competencies that students should be meeting at different grade levels. Some competencies directly examine speech and language skills (i.e., speaking and listening skills). Most competencies require strong communication skills to demonstrate proficiency. These are a rich source of functional communication skills.

Schools will often complete criterion referenced testing, much of which examines language and literacy skills. Criterion-referenced assessments look at individual skill mastery (proficiency) versus comparing student performance with peers. Common criterion-referenced assessments that may be helpful include:

- Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
- i-Ready
- Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS)
- STAR assessment
- Wisconsin Forward Exam

## Academic Activities

Often, teachers will use published curricula that contain their own assessments. Examining students' performance on these assessments will help determine if they are meeting the criteria (or, a criterion) with their academic performance.

In addition, teachers will create assessments based on standards. Examples of these include reading running records and use of rubrics in writing assessments. Review of student performance on these measures is recommended when conducting a comprehensive assessment during an evaluation for special education.

Criterion-referenced assessments are an essential component of conducting a comprehensive assessment for speech and language skills. By utilizing these assessments, an evaluator can gain a clearer picture of a student's speech or language skills across contexts and tasks.

## References

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