

## Chapter 9: The Role of the Speech-Language Pathologist in Evaluating Communication Skills

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### Contents

<a href="#">Chapter Overview</a> .....	145
<a href="#">Role of Speech-Language Pathologists</a> .....	145
<a href="#">Guidelines for SLPs</a> .....	146
<a href="#">Background Language History (How did the student learn both languages?)</a> .....	146
<a href="#">Informal Language Observations (How does the student communicate in conversation?)</a> .....	147
<a href="#">Formal Language Assessment (Is it possible to use formal tests with English learners?)</a> .....	147
<a href="#">Putting It All Together (What do these observations mean?)</a> .....	149
<a href="#">Resources</a> .....	149

### Chapter Overview

The main goal of this chapter is to provide guidelines for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) for the evaluation of English learners (ELs) for a possible speech-language impairment (SLI). It addresses the role of SLPs and then provides guidelines for SLPs. The guidelines are based on answering three questions:(a) How do cultural diversity and bilingual language development in ELs have an effect on the diagnostic procedures used by speech-language pathologists to assess these students' communication skills?; (b) How do speech-language pathologists select the most appropriate diagnostic procedures for ELs?; and (c) Once speech-language clinicians gather all diagnostic information, how do they interpret it to make accurate diagnostic observations and decide if remediation is needed?

### Role of Speech-Language Pathologists

With the growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population whose first language is other than English, educators must provide appropriate services to support ELs' academic achievement. This increase in the number of ELs coincides with increased referrals, particularly from classroom teachers, for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to evaluate these students for possible SLIs. Differentiating whether an EL has a SLI from or is simply learning an additional language is not always easily determined. This is due to many factors, including unique cultural, linguistic, and educational history, educators' unique cultural, linguistic, educational histories that differ from those of the student, lack of valid assessments, materials, and resources appropriate for each of the many languages represented in today's school population.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) is the primary national organization for SLPs. Its Code of Ethics states, “Individuals shall not discriminate in the delivery of professional services...on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity/gender expression, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin, disability, culture, language, or dialect.”<sup>i</sup>

It is the SLP’s responsibility to develop their knowledge and skills so that they can provide culturally and linguistically relevant services to all students, whether the student is an EL or monolingual English student. This requires being cognizant of biases that each of us inherently hold derived from our own culture and linguistic background or that are present in evaluation instruments and resource materials. A recommended starting point before beginning the evaluation of an EL is to do a self-assessment of one’s own cultural competence.<sup>ii</sup> (See the web resource section for cultural competence checklists on Personal Reflection; Policies and Procedures, and Service Delivery.)

## Guidelines for SLPs

The guidelines presented here were adapted from Dr. Jose Centeno, St. John’s University, New York.

### ***Background Language History (How did the student learn both languages?)***

A speech/language evaluation includes careful and systematic interviewing of the student and family or caregivers, teachers, and educational specialists and staff who know the student. In addition to the information collected on the student’s social, educational, and medical history, his or her language background deserves attention in order to understand the language experiences that shaped the student’s language development and that might impact academic development. Language development in English learners is a complex and highly individual process in which both first (L1) and second (L2) languages might differ at different times.<sup>iii</sup> For example, both languages might be used in different situations (e.g., social conversation vs. academic language ) and in different ways (using L1 to speak vs. using L2 to both speak and write) In addition, the EL’s language skills may reflect socioeconomic circumstances involving learning environments and educational opportunities that are different from the traditional middle class context<sup>iv</sup>.

A language background interview should be administered to all individuals who might have relevant information, including the student (if the student is old enough), family/caregivers, and the student’s teachers<sup>v</sup>. Interview questions should address the *where (formal and informal contexts), how (daily language routines), when (age), who (the speakers)* aspects of the student’s language history. SLPs should explore the parents’ language, educational, occupational background, and socioeconomic factors. The beginning of L2 exposure and language use in different areas (home, school, and community) relevant to the student’s age should be explored. For example, ask about when the student started learning L1 and L2; what language the student uses with his/her parents, with siblings, with other relatives at home, with friends, and in the community. What languages are used to read and write at home and at school? How much of each language is employed in the classroom?<sup>vi</sup>

Based on the responses to the questions in the language background inventory, the SLP can examine the use of L1 and L2 throughout the student’s life, knowing that those experiences will have an effect on the EL’s ability to perform on the areas addressed by the evaluation instrument (e.g., vocabulary, sentence construction,

understanding readings passages). Then, the SLP can determine whether a given test is available in L1 for administration to the student.

### ***Informal Language Observations (How does the student communicate in conversation?)***

Another crucial component in the evaluation of communication skills is the observation of *language skills, communication abilities, and behavior* during naturalistic, informal conversation. This includes engaging in conversation with the SLP and in observing conversations with others (e.g., peers, teachers) in different settings (e.g., classroom, playground, cafeteria). Observations should attend to the student's ability to use vocabulary, sentences, narratives, and all other linguistic resources to convey different meanings appropriate for the student's age and sociocultural background. Behaviors displayed during the conversations should also be observed.

- During these observations, the SLP should focus on which language is the *stronger language* used by the EL for comprehension and oral expression. It is typical for multilingual users to combine words or language features from L1 and L2, as shown in the following examples: Use of both languages: "I was standing near the car *cuando ella salió*" [I was standing near the car when she got out])
- Transfer or use of L1 structure in L2 sentences: "Rita has 10 years" [Rita is 10 years old], as could be said by a Spanish speaker)
- Dialectal forms consist of expressions resulting from the specific variety of English used in a community: "I had went" [I had gone] (see Hoffmann, 1991; Romaine, 1995).

Some ELs have a combination of bilingual features and dialectal features.<sup>vii</sup> These kinds of combinations are **not indicative** of a SLI.

Observing the EL's *behaviors* during conversation can indicate the cultural basis for nonverbal elements such as eye contact, facial expressions, proximity to the listener, touching, and turn taking.<sup>viii</sup> The SLP should be aware of typical and expected interpersonal skills and language use during routine dialogue for the EL's background.<sup>ix</sup>

### ***Formal Language Assessment (Is it possible to use formal tests with English learners?)***

The use of a formal test with ELs requires a realistic match between the student's language skills and the test's expected language knowledge. It is a common principle in clinical diagnosis that tests must include the student in the normative or standardization sample, and use language that is known by the student. These are areas in which most formal tests are limited; most ELs have different language, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds, all of which have an effect on the language knowledge brought to a testing session<sup>x</sup>. As a result, the validity of the test is compromised.<sup>xi</sup> Concerns that the SLP should keep in mind include:<sup>xii</sup>

1. Does the test's *normative sample* include individuals sharing the bilingual student's age and socioeconomic background?
2. Does the test employ language (e.g., vocabulary, sentences, etc.) appropriate to the bilingual student's *cultural background*?
3. Does the test use *concepts* (e.g., daily routines, academic concepts, etc.) the student has been exposed to earlier in life?
4. Does the test employ language (e.g., vocabulary, sentences, etc.) appropriate to the bilingual student's *language background* (i.e., dialect of L1 used by student, degree of L1 or L2 proficiency)?

5. Regarding recent immigrant students, has the student been routinely exposed to the *behavioral expectations and procedures* (e.g., attention span, multi-step instructions, etc.) of a structured testing format?

SLPs are expected consider these types questions even when employing tests that have been developed to assess bilingual students' language skills by evaluating them monolingually in each language. For example, the *Preschool Language Scale*<sup>xiii</sup> and the *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals*<sup>xiv</sup> are two tests that exist in both English and Spanish forms yet they should be examined for possible biases and weaknesses.

**Formal test modifications and adaptations.** Because the multilingual student population attending U.S. schools shows great cultural and linguistic diversity, developing formal tests that can universally be used with all of them is an impossible task. The influx of immigrants from all over the world requires SLPs to have accessible ways to assess them.

Often it is necessary to use the formal tests that exist. According to Jose Centeno, a bilingual school psychologist and author, modifications of these tests, using unbiased testing approaches, may be necessary to distinguish language differences from language disorders.<sup>xv</sup> These modifications may take the form of changes in content, tasks, and scoring procedures.<sup>xvi</sup> Verbatim translations of English assessments into the student's first language (or vice versa) are not recommended because the translations might not reflect the actual content or structure of the student's L1. For instance, by translating "ice cream" into Spanish as "helado," the SLP might be presenting a different expression from that used by adults with the student (due to dialectal variations, "ice cream" might be referred to as "cono de helado," "barquilla," "nieve," or simply "helado.") . Similarly, if we translate a sentence such as "the grandfather was kissed by the baby" for a student to identify in a picture in a comprehension task or to repeat in a sentence recall task, this would not be a routine form of Spanish to the student because sentences in the passive voice are rarely used in spoken Spanish and they tend to be only found in formal written Spanish.<sup>xvii</sup>

Examples of modifications include changing tasks, content, or scoring procedures.<sup>xviii</sup> Centeno suggests that for **tasks**, modifications include developing more practice items, rewording the instructions, continuing testing beyond ceiling, and repeating the item more than the number of times recommended by the test. For **content**, modification include changing words or specific items to reflect the student's L1 dialect. For **scoring procedures**, modification include scoring each language and providing raw scores separately (to show possible dominance in one language); these approaches preclude the use of a test's norms and allow only for a focus on weaknesses and strengths.<sup>xix</sup>

**Using interpreters.** The use of interpreters may be required when the EL speaks a language unfamiliar to the SLP. There are several guidelines that should be observed when employing an interpreter in the assessment process.<sup>xx</sup> First, a family member should not be employed due to the close relationship between this person and the student and, in turn, obvious biases that might be brought into the process. Second, interpreters should be trained on their diagnostic role in the student's evaluation; areas to address in training include ethical practices, professional terminology, understanding of the assessment protocol, and native or near-native language skills in the student's language and dialect.<sup>xxi</sup>

### ***Putting It All Together (What do these observations mean?)***

The assessment of communication skills in ELs is a complex task that requires a *holistic approach*, one that combines the collection of three major clusters of information: the student's language history, informal conversational observations, and formal language results. This information should be reviewed in conjunction with other reports available on the student (i.e., educational, medical, psychological, and social history) to produce a whole picture on who the student is in terms of cultural, educational, socioeconomic, and language background. Additional information may include examples of student academic classroom work and review of academic assessments. The interpretation of both informal and informal language results should be based on an understanding of all collected information to decide whether the student's language performance indicates a speech language impairment and the need for either language instruction or language therapy.

## **Resources**

### ***American Speech-Language-Hearing Association***

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2010). [Cultural competence checklist: Personal reflection](http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Personal-Reflection.pdf). Available at <http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Personal-Reflection.pdf>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2010), [Cultural competence checklist: Policies and procedures](http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Policies-Procedures.pdf). Available at <http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Policies-Procedures.pdf>
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2010), [Cultural competence checklist: Service delivery](http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Service-Delivery.pdf). Available at <http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Cultural-Competence-Checklist-Service-Delivery.pdf>

### ***Minnesota Speech-Language-Hearing Association***

- Minnesota Speech-Language-Hearing Association (Revised 2012). [Talk with me manual](http://www.msha.net/?page=talk_with_me_manual). [http://www.msha.net/?page=talk\\_with\\_me\\_manual](http://www.msha.net/?page=talk_with_me_manual)

### ***Interviews***

- [Bilingualism and Speech-Language Pathology](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxnN6lg4bqc), September 20, 2013. Interview with Kathryn Kohnert, PhD, CCC-SLP. Professor Emerita, University of Minnesota. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxnN6lg4bqc>
- [Discriminating Children with SLI Among English Language Learners](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8vmuOxo_9g), March 26, 2015. Johanne Paradis, Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Alberta. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8vmuOxo\\_9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8vmuOxo_9g)
- [Practical Assessment & Treatment Strategies for English language learners with language impairments](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvaVwG6dF68), May 2, 2016. Celeste Roseberry-McKibbin, PhD, CCC-SLP. Professor, Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, California State University, Sacramento, Sacramento, CA. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvaVwG6dF68>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2015). [Code of ethics](http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/ET2016-00342.pdf). Retrieved from <http://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/ET2016-00342.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2004). Knowledge and skills needed by speech-language pathologists and audiologists to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services. *ASHA Supplement*, 24, 152–158. Retrieved from <https://www.njsha.org/resources/committee-resources/pdfs/knowledge-cultural.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> See additional information in Chapter 4.

<sup>iv</sup> Garcia, E. (1999). *Student cultural diversity: Understanding and meeting the challenge* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>v</sup> Centeno, J. G., & Eng, N. (2006). Bilingual speech-language pathology consultants in culturally diverse schools: Considerations on theoretically based consultee engagement. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 16(40), 333-347. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604_8)

<sup>vi</sup> (Centeno, J. G., & Eng, N. (2006). Bilingual speech-language pathology consultants in culturally diverse schools: Considerations on theoretically based consultee engagement. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 16(40), 333-347. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604_8)

<sup>vii</sup> Parker, F., & Reily, K. (2000). *Linguistics for non-linguists: A primer with exercises* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

<sup>viii</sup> Goldstein, B. (2000). *Cultural and linguistic diversity resource guide for speech-language pathologists*. San Diego, CA: Singular.

<sup>ix</sup> Anderson, R. (2002). Practical assessment strategies with Hispanic students. In A. Brice (Ed.), *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education* (pp. 143-184). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon; Battle, D. (2002). *Communication disorders in multicultural populations* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). Boston, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.; 2012, Brice, A. (Ed.). (2002). *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>x</sup> Centeno, J. G., & Eng, N. (2006). Bilingual speech-language pathology consultants in culturally diverse schools: Considerations on theoretically based consultee engagement. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 16(40), 333-347. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532768Xjepc1604_8)

<sup>xi</sup> Anderson, R. (2002). Practical assessment strategies with Hispanic students. In A. Brice (Ed.), *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education* (pp. 143-184). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>xii</sup> Anderson, R. (2002). Practical assessment strategies with Hispanic students. In A. Brice (Ed.), *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education* (pp. 143-184). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon; Chamberlain, P., & Medinos-Landurand, P. (1991). Practical considerations for the assessment of LEP student with special needs. In E. V. Hamayan and J. S. Damico (Eds.), *Limiting bias in the assessment of bilingual students* (pp. 111-156). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed; Kayser, H. (1995). Bilingualism, myths, and language impairments. In H. Kayser (Ed.), *Bilingual speech-language pathology: An Hispanic focus* (pp. 185-206). San Diego, CA: Singular; Langdon, H. W. (2008). *Assessment and intervention for communication disorders in culturally and linguistically diverse populations*. Clifton Park, NY: Thomson Delmar Learning.

<sup>xiii</sup> Zimmerman, I. L., Steiner, V. G., & Pond, R. E. (2002). *Preschool Language Scale-4*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation; Zimmerman, I. L., Steiner, V. G., & Pond, R. E. (2002). *Preschool Language Scale-4: Spanish Edition*. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.

<sup>xiv</sup> Wiig, E. H., Semel, E., & Secord, W. A. (2013). *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals* (5th ed.). San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.

<sup>xv</sup> Centeno, J., and Obler, L. K. (2001). Principles of bilingualism. In M. Pontón and J. L. Carrión (Eds.), *Neuropsychology and the Hispanic patient* (pp. 75-86). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Centeno, J. G., & Eng, N. (2006). Bilingual speech-

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<sup>xvi</sup> Brice, A. (Ed.). (2002). *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>xvii</sup> Centeno, J. G. (2003, June). *Application of sociolinguistic principles of bilingualism in speech-language pathology*. Paper presented at the Clinical Issues in the Assessment and Treatment of Language Difficulties of Multilingual Children Conference, Montreal, Canada.

<sup>xviii</sup> Brice, A. (Ed.). (2002). *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon; Centeno, J. G. (2003, June). *Application of sociolinguistic principles of bilingualism in speech-language pathology*. Paper presented at the Clinical Issues in the Assessment and Treatment of Language Difficulties of Multilingual Children Conference, Montreal, Canada.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Anderson, R. (2002). Practical assessment strategies with Hispanic students. In A. Brice (Ed.), *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture, and education* (pp. 143-184). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.