



Making the Most of Assessment



**What Every Practitioner Should Know About
Assessing Young English Language Learners**

Purpose of the Guide

This guide is designed to provide early childhood (EC) professionals like Ms. Diaz with some basic information about different assessment approaches, particularly for young ELLs. Such information is essential as EC professionals are increasingly encouraged or required to collect and interpret information about children’s development, as well as participate in large-scale research studies.

The purpose of this guide is not to provide you with a list of “good” assessments (it really depends upon what you are trying to accomplish with the assessment), but to help you become more informed about assessing ELLs.

CASE NOTE

Ms. Diaz teaches preschool in Southern California. Nearly half of her students are English Language Learners (ELLs). Most of them speak Spanish at home, but there are a small number of Mandarin-speaking children also enrolled in the center. Growing up an English Language Learner herself, she knows the importance of engaging children in rich conversations in both English and Spanish. She has difficulty, however, engaging her Chinese students in the same conversations and cannot always tell how well they have grasped a new concept.

Ms. Diaz informally assesses her students’ conceptual understanding by asking open-ended questions. She also keeps a running record of her observations. She has decided, however, that a more formal approach to assessing her students may be warranted, in order to more systematically follow students’ progress and tailor instruction in the classroom, particularly in language and literacy development. Where should she start?



Children who primarily speak a language other than English at home are considered **English-language learners**

Why assess?

Assessments can take many forms from observing children’s play or examining the quality of classroom activities to administering standardized measures to children. This guide fill focus on what we informally call **direct child assessments**.

Before selecting a particular tool, it is important to decide what kinds of questions you wish to answer or your purpose for assessing. According to the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) there are four broad purposes for using assessments. Assessments can be used for:

- Individualizing children’s instruction.
- Screening children who may need special services.
- Following trends or evaluating programs.
- Program accountability.



Similar to tools you find in a hardware store, your selection of an assessment will depend upon your purpose (you would not use a screwdriver, for instance, to hammer nails). To date, most assessments have been designed for one, not multiple purposes. For example, results from an assessment that is meant to help teachers individualize instruction will generally not provide adequate information to formally identify a child for special services.

What are important issues to consider when assessing ELLs?

Like Ms. Diaz, many early childhood professionals work with children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Some children may enter school fluent in their home language, but with little exposure to English. Others may be fluent in multiple languages.

Professionals working with young ELLs have the challenging job of gaining a sense of how well children understand and express themselves in their home language and English *in addition to* how well they grasp new concepts. For example, a child may have a thorough understanding of their colors and numbers in Spanish, but be unable to communicate this understanding in English.

Beyond language and cultural issues, other challenges exist in assessing young children’s development including their rapid and sometimes uneven growth in different areas, lack of familiarity with formal testing/school-like activities, and comfort in working with unfamiliar adults.

What concepts are covered in an assessment?

Similar to determining your purpose, it is important to decide what concept(s) you are most interested in examining. Some assessment tools such as the *Receptive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (ROWPVT)* focus on a more narrow set of concepts related to child development (i.e., receptive vocabulary). Others such as *FirstSTEP* or the *Battelle Developmental Inventory* tap a wider range of concepts including motor, cognitive, social-emotional, and language skills.

Who administers assessments?

Assessments should be administered systematically. In other words, administrators should follow procedures created by the test developer as closely as possible in order to gain **reliable** or trustworthy results – this usually requires some training and practice. Publishers will often outline the level of education, experience and training needed to administer a particular measure.



Depending upon the type and purpose of the assessment, children may need to be referred to professionals such as speech therapists or psychologists who are specifically trained to assess children. Even if another professional is in charge of conducting an assessment and interpreting the results, it is useful to know at a basic level what is involved including time, cost, and scoring requirements.

How much time will it take?

Assessments vary in administration time from a few minutes to over an hour per child, depending upon the comprehensiveness of the assessments. While publishers generally provide an estimate of time needed to complete an assessment, extra prep time may be necessary, especially when you are beginning to use a new assessment.

How much will it cost?

Assessments vary widely in cost. Some assessments may require purchasing a toolkit containing an examiner's manual and other props. Others require minimal investment beyond printing and copying costs. Most publishers provide detailed pricing information on their websites. It is important to note that some assessments may require that you purchase forms or pay a fee for each assessment completed in addition to materials or "toolkit" costs.

In a recent review of over 20 early childhood assessments, costs per measure ranged from free (downloadable on the web) to over \$1100

How do you score it?

Assessments vary in how they are scored. Some simply require adding up the **raw score** or number of correct/incorrect responses. Others require administrators to convert raw scores into **percentiles** or **age equivalent scores** using a reference sheet to allow comparisons against the performance of other children. A growing number of assessments offer web-based or computer-based systems which simplify the entering and scoring process.

Understanding what scores mean is just as important as learning how to administer a particular assessment! Most manuals provide information about interpreting scores. Depending upon how complex the scoring system is, you may need to consult someone with greater expertise to help you understand the results. In any case, don't be afraid to ask questions.



How do I communicate the results to parents and other teachers?

A growing number of manuals discuss how to communicate the results of assessments to parents and other professionals. Some manuals even provide worksheets that teachers (or whomever administers the assessment) can copy and share with parents regarding the focus of the assessment, their child's performance and suggestions for engaging children in related instructional or remedial activities.

Is this assessment appropriate for children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

While much work has been done to create assessments that are appropriate for children and families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it is necessary to ask many questions when selecting an assessment tool, such as:

- Has the assessment been widely used with children from diverse backgrounds?
- Are questions and activities contained in the assessment culturally relevant? (e.g., questions related to making snowmen may have little meaning for children living in warm climates).
- Are different dialects taken into account in translating a given assessment (For example, the word “sock” was translated into Spanish as “calcetín” in one assessment. Some Spanish-speaking groups do not know this translation of “sock” and may be more likely to use the word “media” instead).
- Do translated versions of an assessment keep a comparable format, structure, and complexity as the English version though the items or questions likely differ across languages? (e.g., if children are asked to point to the picture that corresponds with target words in English, they should be asked to do the same thing in Spanish).

Of course, no single assessment is perfect. Nonetheless, asking some of the above questions may help to ensure the most appropriate assessment tools are used for children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

CASE NOTE

After spending time researching different assessment approaches and talking to colleagues, Ms. Diaz decided to start with a short, easy-to-administer language assessment in order to better track her students' development of English proficiency over the school year. Through this process, she learned about available resources and individuals who are able to help with assessment issues. She also came to realize that there is not one “right way” to assess her students. It is essential, however, to have a clear understanding of the area(s) you wish to assess and whether an assessment is appropriate for the children and families you serve.





TO DEEPEN YOUR KNOWLEDGE

So far, we have provided a rough sketch of important issues to consider when thinking about assessing young children, particularly ELLs. There is, of course, much more ground to cover. Read on to learn more about assessment (and where to look for further information).

What's the difference between informal and formal assessments?

Assessments are sometimes described as either informal or formal – although distinctions between the two are often blurred.

Informal assessments are generally used to inform instruction on an ongoing basis. They tend to include tools that are classroom based, such as observational notes, checklists, and student portfolios. Teachers or those who work closely with the child are most likely to complete informal assessments periodically throughout the year to track a child's progress and use the information to adjust the instructional activities provided in the classroom.

Formal or standardized assessments such as direct child assessments, rating checklists, and surveys have undergone some empirical study and are commonly used to screen or assess children in need of special services, follow trends and evaluate program effectiveness. Formal assessments often require more training and may be conducted by individuals outside the classroom (e.g., speech therapist, educational researcher).

Why is training, particularly in the case of formal assessments, so important?

Imagine if you asked a child about their birthday using one of these similar sounding questions - What day is your birthday? When do you celebrate your birthday? When were you born? Would you get the same answer? If administrators veer from the official wording of questions on an assessment or do not follow scoring rules consistently, we would not necessarily have much confidence in the results from one child to the next. We may unintentionally get different results and as a result have trouble understanding what the results mean.

Depending upon the length and complexity of administering and scoring a particular assessment, individuals may need to read through the manual, watch training videos, attend workshops and/or practice administering the assessment prior to using the instrument. It is therefore important to factor not only the cost of training but time required to be fully trained (in some instances, this may involve hiring substitutes to cover teachers while they attend trainings, etc.). Regardless of

the training requirements outlined by the publisher, you should include time to practice using the assessment before beginning to use it in earnest.

Some publishers may also require that individuals administering the measure complete a qualification form related to their educational background and knowledge of educational and psychological measurement. Similarly, publishers may limit the types of organizations or educational qualifications (e.g., school districts, clinical psychologists) able to purchase a particular assessment.

What do the scores mean?

There are two broad types of assessments or tests – criterion and norm-referenced. A **criterion-referenced test** assesses an individual’s proficiency in certain skills in relation to established benchmarks. For example, a criterion-referenced test related to concepts of print may designate children as having “mastered”, “on the road to mastering” or “not yet mastered” concepts of print.

In contrast, a **norm-referenced test** is a type of test in which a child’s score can be compared to a group of similar children who have previously completed the same assessment. This group is commonly referred to as the **norming** or **standardization sample**. You can compare your classroom scores to scores from the norming sample. Before making such comparisons, however, it is important to consider who was included within this norming sample and how well their characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, social class) mirror children in your classroom.

How can I learn more about an assessment before buying it?

As a consumer, you should feel free to ask the publisher for any information that will help you in making your decision. Promotional materials for assessments will generally provide information regarding what concepts or skills are covered, either for the full assessment or any separate sub-tests or scales that make up the complete instrument. You may also ask whether it is possible to get a sample of items covered within the assessment from the publisher, in order to get a better picture of what a child (or parent or teacher) will be asked to do.



What do all of the statistics in the manual mean?

Publishers will often invest in large studies to examine the **reliability** and **validity** of a particular direct child assessment . This information (in the form of statistics) is often provided in the test manual. While you do not necessarily need to understand all of the statistics, it is important to examine how much is known about a given assessment's characteristics or empirical base. There are numerous reference books and websites that provide detailed reviews of assessments including reliability and validity information.

Reliability refers to how precise or trustworthy a test score is in capturing the skills, attitudes or abilities it is purported to measure.

Validity refers to the degree to which all accumulated evidence supports the interpretation and use of test scores for a particular

To Learn More:

Assessing young children

- Berry, D., Bridges, L. & Zaslow, M. (Eds.) (2004). Early childhood measures profiles. Washington, DC: ChildTrends. [http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child Trends-2004 09 01 FR ECMeasures.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2004_09_01_FR_ECMeasures.pdf)
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- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). *The Words We Use: A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Education Standards and Assessment*: www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary
- Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group. (1998). *Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments*. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel. <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/Reports/prinrec.pdf>
- McAfee, O., & Leong, D.J. (2002). *Assessing and guiding young children's development and learning*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- NAEYC Resources on Assessment: <http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200401/PrintResources.pdf>
- National Child Care Information Center. *Child Outcomes Assessment Tools for Early Childhood Education page with links to numerous reports and websites*: <http://www.nccic.org/poptopics/childoutcome.html>

Assessing young English Language Learners

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). *Screening & Assessment of Young English-Language Learners*. [http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/ELL Supplement.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/ELL_Supplement.asp)
- Barrueco, S., López, M.L., Ong, C. & Lozano, P. (2007) *A Compendium of Measures for the Assessment of Young English Language Learners*. Commissioned report for First 5 LA and the Pew Charitable Trusts' Early Childhood Accountability Project.
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Authors

Christine Ong, Ph.D. & Patricia Lozano, M.A.,

First 5 LA

Michael L. López, Ph.D.,

The National Center for Latino Child & Family Research, &

Sandra Barrueco, Ph.D.,

The Catholic University of America

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About First 5 LA:

First 5 LA is a unique child-advocacy organization created by California voters to invest tobacco tax revenues in programs for improving the lives of children in Los Angeles County, from prenatal through age 5. First 5 LA champions health, education and safety causes concerning young children and families.

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