Making the Most of Assessment

What Every Practitioner Should Know About Assessing Young English Language Learners
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 has also started a running record of her observations for particular children. Reviewing this information, she has decided that a more formal approach to assessing her students may be warranted, so that she can more systematically follow students’ progress. She also hopes to better tailor her instruction, particularly in language and literacy development. Where should she start?

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

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 will focus on what we informally call direct child assessments.

Before selecting a particular direct assessment tool, it’s 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.

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 EC practitioners 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.

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 narrow set of concepts related to language 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.

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. Publishers will often outline the level of education and experience needed to administer a particular measure. 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 its comprehensive-ness. 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 tool.
In a recent review of over 20 early childhood assessments, costs per measure ranged from free (downloadable on the web) to over $1100.

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 require that you purchase forms or pay a fee for each assessment completed in addition to toolkit costs.

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 electronic systems which simplify the entering and scoring process.

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 results 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 make assessments 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).

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• Are different dialects taken into account in translating a given assessment (e.g., Spanish speakers from different parts of the world may use different terms for the word “sock” such as “calcetín” or “media”)

• Do translated versions of an assessment have a comparable format, structure and level of complexity as the English version, though items or questions may differ somewhat across languages? (e.g., if children are asked to point to the picture that corresponds with a target word in English, they should be asked to do the same thing in Spanish).

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

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 through the year to track a child’s progress. Information from informal assessments is used to adjust the instructional activities provided in the classroom.

Formal or standardized assessments tend to include direct child assessments, rating checklists, and surveys. Formal assessments 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 cannot necessarily have much confidence in the results. We may then have trouble understanding what these results mean.

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Depending upon the length and complexity of administering and scoring a particular assessment, individuals may need to read through the manual, watch training videos and/or attend workshops 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 professionals (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 peers 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 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 on the full assessment and/or on separate sub-tests or scales that make up the assessment. You may also ask whether it is possible to get a sample of items covered within the assessment from the publisher,
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.

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**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 detail her students’ English proficiency. 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 or perfect assessment tool. 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.*

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**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 purpose.
To learn more...


- 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/eeeglossary


- NAEYC Resources on Assessment: http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200401/PrintResources.pdf


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