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Minding the Gap Part Two: English Language Learners

by Abby Sakovich M.S., CCC-SLP

Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) play an important part in minding the gap between a student's academic and social language. Under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), schools must select a team to conduct assessments and interventions. A student may be determined eligible for Special Education due to the presence of a disability, not due to limited English proficiency. By conducting thorough evaluations, SLPs provide insight into a student's cognitive and academic potential to determine whether the gap between social and academic language is the result of a disability or due to second language acquisition (i.e., see Minding the Gap Part One: English Language Learners).

Before Evaluating:

- Collect extensive background information from parents, teachers, etc.
- Research the rules of morphology, syntax, and pragmatics of a student's primary language (L1) and dialect
- Observe the student at school and at home if possible
- Provide intervention strategies and suggestions to classroom teacher
- Compare results of intervention data to students with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Limited English Proficiency	Potential Learning Disability
• difficulty understanding vocabulary in English but not L1	• difficulty understanding vocabulary in both languages
• difficulty following directions and directions require frequent repetition in English but not L1	• difficulty following directions and directions require frequent repetition in L1 and L2 (second language)
• student may delay responding to questions in English, but a gradual improvement is seen over time	• student consistently delays responding to questions in both languages without clear improvement over time
• poor vocabulary, sentence structure, and self-confidence when speaking	• speech is unintelligible in L1 and L2
• story comprehension appears to be impacted by lack of background knowledge in English	• difficulty telling or retelling a story or familiar event in both L1 and L2
• lack of expressive language in English, may be due to silent period in L2	• poor expressive language in both languages

When assessing English Language Learners (ELLs), schools must test students in their first language and English. The law does not require teams use a standardized assessment, and modifying standardized assessments during an evaluation is acceptable. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) reminds SLPs that results of a standardized test, whether or not modifications have occurred, are invalid if the student's cultural background is not represented in the normative sample. These assessments can provide invaluable information about a student's language strengths and weaknesses, modified or not.
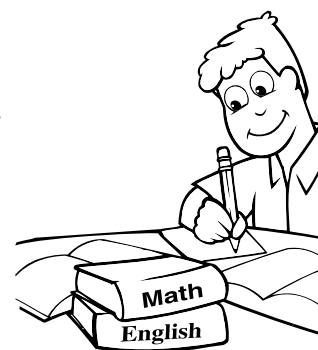
Evaluation Modifications to Consider:
- Compare the results of assessment to results from typical students of the same cultural background
- Rephrase directions and give multiple examples in both languages before administering assessment tasks
- Increase wait time for responses, especially when administering a task in both languages
- Accept semantically related responses
- Give credit if a student provides a culturally relevant explanation to an incorrect response
- Allow a student to answer in L1 or L2 (i.e., conceptual scoring)
- Test beyond the ceiling to obtain a larger picture of a student's language abilities

During the evaluation, the use of vague terminology to describe the function of objects can be an indicator that a student's difficulty is the result of a disability. Often, students with true language-learning impairments have difficulty with tasks that target working memory or information processing. Non-word repetition tasks can provide helpful information into a student's language strengths and weaknesses because they rely on short-term processing and not vocabulary knowledge impacted by previous exposure.

The Assessment Process retrieved 9/6/2016 from www.asha.org
English Learner Tool Kit retrieved 9/6/2016 from www2.ed.gov

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