



English Learners and Evaluation for Special Education

The Indiana Association of School Psychologists (IASP) has reviewed the memo released in January 2014 entitled “English Learners and Evaluation for Special Education.” While IASP agrees with the inclusion of English Learner staff in the evaluation process, IASP would like to expand upon the evaluation procedures that were included in the memo for English Learners, emphasizing the potential difficulties in administering monolingual assessments in the student’s native language and highlighting the potential usefulness of completing assessments in English with English Learners. Special education evaluations for English Learners are complex and require the multi-disciplinary team to gather data from several sources and utilize best practices when analyzing evaluation data to make high stakes decisions regarding eligibility for special education.

Determining what language or languages to utilize when assessing an English Learner is not an automatic decision. The multi-disciplinary team needs to consider several factors, such as the student’s proficiency in his or her native language, the student’s proficiency in English, the student’s education and language history, the availability of standardized assessments in the student’s native language, and the availability of a bilingual school psychologist or interpreter for the student’s native language. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), there are ten bilingual school psychologists licensed in Indiana (who are NASP members as of Summer 2014). Even if a school district has access to a bilingual school psychologist who is fluent in the student’s native language, there are not standardized assessments available in all utilized languages. For example, in Fort Wayne Community Schools, their English Learner population represents over 70 languages. In addition, there are some English Learners whose native language does not have a written component, which further limits the utility of standardized assessments. In situations in which an assessment instrument in the student’s native language and a bilingual school psychologist are available, testing a student with a monolingual assessment in his or her native language may not best represent the student’s ability if he or she is not proficient in his or her native language or if the assessment does not address all of the areas of functioning that are relevant to the referral concern. Multi-disciplinary teams may come across situations in which an English Learner student is not proficient in either his or her native language or English. Therefore, additional ways to gather assessment information must be utilized.

Samuel Ortiz’s best practices in non-discriminatory assessment (Flanagan, Ortiz, and Alfonso, 2013) offer multi-disciplinary teams guidelines to consider when completing evaluations for English Learners and for equitable decision-making. The Culture-Language Interpretive Matrix (C-LIM) is one specific tool that the school psychologist may utilize to assist in analyzing evaluation data when cognitive assessments are administered in English and follow the standardized administration procedures. The C-LIM can be utilized to assist with the interpretation of evaluation results and decision about the influence of culture and linguistic differences. The student’s performance is analyzed to see if his or her pattern of performance is within the range that would be expected of other individuals with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The C-LIM is just one tool, and multi-disciplinary teams should consider all gathered information when determining if the student’s English language proficiency is the primary cause of the English Learner’s educational performance.

Once standardized assessments have been completed in English, the multi-disciplinary team can complete supplemental monolingual or bilingual assessments in the student's native language when assessments are available in the student's native language. The use of a bilingual school psychologist or speech-language pathologist for speech and language assessments is preferred since standardization guidelines would be followed. However, in cases when a bilingual school psychologist or speech-language pathologist is not available, an interpreter trained in standardized testing procedures may be utilized with the appropriate multi-disciplinary team member present (i.e., school psychologist or speech-language pathologist). The school psychologist or speech-language pathologist should guide the interpreter through the administration of the assessment and be present during the administration to assist in following standardized scoring procedures. It is recommended that the district designate specific interpreters for use in test administration and in case conferences since additional training in special education and standardized test procedures is necessary. Also, the interpreter should be knowledgeable of the differences between dialects of the student's native language. In circumstances in which a standardized assessment is not available in the student's native language, supplemental qualitative information can be gathered through the use of a bilingual team member or trained interpreter. For example, the multi-disciplinary team may wish to have the interpreter assist the school psychologist by administering the math problem solving measure in the student's native language to analyze if the language used to deliver the story problem impacted the student's performance.

In summary, the assessment of English Learners is a complex process that involves the collection of information from several sources and in multiple languages. The multi-disciplinary team needs to be knowledgeable of best practices surrounding non-discriminatory evaluation procedures and utilize all gathered information to make equitable, high-stakes decisions. Solely testing an English Learner in his or her native language is not always feasible given the low number of bilingual school psychologists in Indiana and the lack of standardized assessments in all of the languages utilized by Indiana's English Learner population. Also, some English Learners are not proficient in their native languages, and therefore, assessing in the students' native languages would not best represent their ability. IASP would like to emphasize that completing standardized evaluations in English with English Learners can provide the multi-disciplinary team with valuable information when trying to determine if the student's English language proficiency is the primary cause of the student's educational performance. That said, IASP values supplemental assessment information gathered in the student's native language and highlights the need for a student's case conference committee to consider all available information in making special education eligibility decisions.

Flanagan, D.P., Ortiz, S.L., & Alfonso, V.C. (2013). Cross-battery assessment of individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In Flanagan, D.P., Ortiz, S.L., & Alfonso, V.C., *Essentials of cross-battery assessment, 3rd Edition* (pp. 287-350), Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

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