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AUTHOR Cohen, Andrew D.
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ABSTRACT

Discussed are problems to consider and possible techniques to use in assessing the English speaking skills of bilingual children. Reviewed is literature on the reasons for differences in ease of acquisition of English speaking skills among bilingual children (such as personality variables) and on inadequacies of existing language assessment instruments. Six means of assessing English speaking skills among nonnatives (such as the Bilingual Syntax Measure) are described briefly, and four suggestions for assessment (such as use of an eclectic approach) are offered. (LS)

Assessing the English Speaking Skills of Bilingual Children

Andrew D. Cohen
Centre for Applied Linguistics
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
&
Illinois Bilingual Evaluation
Center (Downstate)

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Assessing the English Speaking Skills of Bilingual Children

The last decade has seen many changes in approaches to classifying school children for instructional purposes. Intelligence tests have been subjected to careful scrutiny by well-trained bilinguals (De Avila, 1972) and have even been eliminated from test batteries in many school districts (Bordie, 1970). School personnel have come to sort out cultural differences in children from cultural deficits (Bruck, 1972). Innovative researchers like Jane Mercer have even provided the assessment field with instruments for distinguishing sociocultural difference from mental retardation (Mercer, 1975; Soeffing, 1975).

This paper will focus exclusively on the bilingual child who is dominant in a language other than English and who has a sociocultural background different from that of the majority group. The paper will also restrict itself to ways in which an applied linguist might assess English speaking skills among such children.

In my own evaluation of bilingual programs over the years, I have noted that some bilingual children learn to speak English quickly and effectively, while others take more time and experience difficulties. In other words, sociocultural difference and non-English language background have differential effects on the acquisition of English-speaking skills among bilingual children. What are some of the reasons for these differences? Clearly, intelligence may have something to do with differences in vocabulary acquisition and retention among bilingual children. But there are a number of other factors which are recently gaining greater visibility in the literature. Such factors include not only linguistic strategies for communication,

but cognitive style, personality, and attitudinal factors as well.

With regard to linguistic factors manifested in speech, bilingual children employ strategies for simplifying the communication task -- strategies often resulting in deviant forms. Such strategies include negative transfer (or interference) from the native language and overgeneralization within the target language. The student may also utilize types of avoidance of forms or rules that he does not have mastery over, through paraphrase, topic avoidance, appeal to authority, and so forth (Tarone, Cohen, Dumas, 1976). Such avoidance may or may not result in grammatical errors or inappropriate utterances, given the particular context. It may be that some of these linguistic devices are used more frequently by more successful speakers, though this is still very much a research question. For example, research may show that an increase in overgeneralization type-errors and a decrease in negative transfer errors indicates progress in the acquisition of speaking skills (Cohen, 1976).

Cognitive style variables may, in fact, be closely linked to linguistic factors. For example, cognitive measures such as word-color discrimination tests measuring general transfer skills and category-width tests measuring skill at categorization or generalization may ultimately help predict ease at learning to speak a second language (Naiman, Fröhlich, & Stern, 1975). The dimension of field independence has also been related to language learning in that the field independence learner may, in fact, pay more attention to relevant language details without being distracted by irrelevant ones (Cohen, 1976). Such dimensions may ultimately provide diagnostic information about language learners that language aptitude tests have not provided.

Personality variables may also influence speaking skills. For

example, speaking fluency has been linked to extroversion among Chicano high school students in Los Angeles (Rossier, 1975). Furthermore, Tucker, Hamayan, & Genesee (1975) found that a four-trait factor comprising assertiveness, emotional stability, adventuresomeness, and conscientiousness related to success in speaking French among students in a late (grade 7) French immersion program in Canada.

With respect to attitudinal variables, Naiman et al. (1975) suggest that the way in which the learner perceives his individual learning situation (e.g., the classroom) is more predictive of success than, say, integrative (social) or instrumental (economic) motivation, two of Gardner & Lambert's (1972) principal attitudinal variables. Their conclusions were based both on content analysis of interviews with language learners and on statistical correlations between attitudinal variables and achievement.

An enlightened assessment of speaking involves: (1) an aware of how respondents' characteristics match the selected instrument(s) and administration procedures, and (2) a well-thought-out plan for scoring, interpreting, and using the results. These considerations have already received considerable attention in the literature, so in this paper I will refer to some of the relevant articles only in passing.

With respect to instrumentation, any instrument is but one way of getting at the reality -- in this case, the child's English-speaking skills. Kenneth Goodman cautions against "reification" and "reductionism."[1] Reification implies that a measure of some construct (e.g., speaking

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skills) begins to be equated with the construct itself, both by the test constructors and by users. Reductionism implies reducing a construct such as English speaking to one single test score. Thus, the evaluator should be entirely aware of both the explicit and implicit assumptions underlying the instrument.

The literature has referred to linguistic, cognitive style, and sociocultural mismatches between what the test presupposes about the respondents and what the bilingual minority child actually brings to the test. The linguistic content of the test may inadvertently penalize the non-native speaker (Fishman et al., 1967; Kennedy, 1972; De Avila, 1972; Hickey, 1972; Brière, 1973; Cohen, 1975a). Even translations (rather than parallel versions) of instruments in the learner's native language may penalize the bilingual child to the extent that the level of grammatical and lexical difficulty and frequency of words are different in the learner's native-language form.

Measures designed for Anglo middle-class children may also cater to certain cognitive styles. For example, field dependence as discussed above has been identified as more prevalent among lower-class Mexican American children than among middle-class Anglos (Ramírez & Castañeda, 1975). Rosalie Cohen (1969) has defined relational and analytic styles and has identified them with lower- and middle-class learners respectively.

The literature also calls ample attention to the lack of fit between the sociocultural content of an assessment instrument and the sociocultural background of the respondent (see, for example, Fishman et al., 1967; Ervin-Tripp, 1971; De Avila, 1972; Brière,

1973; Cicourel, 1974; Mercer, 1975; Soeffing, 1975; Condon, 1975; Cohen, 1975b).

With regard to administering a measure of speaking skill, there is the problem of matching up the tester's expectations and (possibly) his ethnicity to the learner's expectations and test-taking know how (Schroeder & Kleinsasser, 1972; Mehan, 1974; Cohen, 1975a), particularly in more formal test-taking situations. The language of test administration also may affect the outcomes -- e.e., the choice of languages and the actual structures used (Kennedy, 1970; Condon, 1975). Especially in the case of individually-administered tests such as the WISC, the tester must interpret the child's behavior. As Mehan (1974) put it, "The interrogator and respondent work together to jointly compose the 'social fact' we call an answer-to-a-question" (p.44). This delicate interaction between tester and respondent can be affected by a multiplicity of factors, not the least of which being how comfortable the respondent feels. Ervin-Tripp (1971) suggests starting an elicitation task with jokes, stories or other means to put the minority student at ease.

Language assessment instruments may appear to have no overt linguistic, cognitive style, or sociocultural biases in them, and may still fall prey to criticism for lack of an appropriate scoring system or an absence of clear-cut guidelines for interpreting and/or using the results (Condon, 1975; De Avila, 1972; Cohen, 1975b). An instrument may have so narrow a scoring system that much useful information is overlooked (c.f. the problem of "reductionism" mentioned above) or so broad a system that no two scorers can agree on the outcome.

One key to interpreting what the results of a measure mean is that of norms. Unfortunately, where English norms exist for language

tests, such norms may be grossly inappropriate for minority group bilinguals (Bordie, 1970; Hoepfner & Strickland, 1972; De Avila, 1972; Brière, 1973). Furthermore, tests supposedly constructed in Spanish and English for testing bilingual language skills (e.g., Elizabeth Carrow's Auditory Comprehension Test and the language subtest of McGraw-Hill's Test of Basic Experiences) are generally lacking norms for the Spanish version. With or without norms, test results are sometimes used in ways that the test constructors had not intended. Classifying a bilingual as a limited English speaker should be in reference either to the speech of other bilinguals of similar sociocultural backgrounds or to the developing (often non-standard) speech of lower-class Anglo children.

Largely as a result of federal and state bilingual schooling programs, teachers and evaluators have started looking for measures of bilingual speaking skills. Whereas in 1971 there were only a few measures on the market, such as the Dailey Language Facility Test (Arlington Corporation) (see Cohen, 1975a), as of 1976 there are a wide range of formal measures and less-formal procedures for assessing speaking skills. These approaches differ in a variety of ways: child speaking to peer vs. child speaking to adult; artificial (e.g., story retelling) vs. naturalistic (student interview) vs. natural (informal classroom talk); fixed format (e.g., sentence repetition) vs. structured format (e.g., structured cue response); test of morphology (inflections) vs. test of syntax (sentence structure) vs. test of pronunciation, etc.

The following is a brief, non-evaluative listing of measures which are illustrative of what is now available in the literature, both commercial and non-commercial, for assessing English speaking skills among non-natives:

(1) The Basic Inventory of Natural Language (CHESS & Associates, 4401 Birch Street, Newport Beach, California 92663) -- an instrument which involves the training of children (K - 6) to tell stories to their peers, in Spanish and in English, thus providing language samples without adult intervention. Teachers then analyze ten sequential sentences from each child's data, on the basis of fluency, level of complexity, and average sentence length.

(2) The Bilingual Syntax Measure (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich) -- an adult interviewer asks children (K - 2) questions in Spanish and English about a series of cartoon pictures. The questions are grammatically motivated in that they are intended to elicit, among other things, verb tense and aspect, and agreement between noun and determiners and subject and verb.

(3) The Short Test of Linguistic Skills (Multilingual Unit, Department of Research and Evaluation, Chicago Board of Education, 2021 N. Burling Street, Chicago, Illinois 60614) -- the speaking subtest has 20 items eliciting from children (grades 3-8) structured conversational responses, structured cue responses, free conversational responses, and free cue responses (based on a picture). English and native language parallel forms exist in 11 languages. The two forms are separate tests -- not translation equivalents -- with culturally-relevant pictures and content.

(4) MAT-SEA-CAL Oral Proficiency Tests (English, Spanish, and other languages) (Seattle Public Schools & Center for Applied Linguistics, 1611 N. Kent Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209) -- the speaking subtests for children (K - 4) include sentence repetition and cued structured response (e.g., "What's the little girl doing? She's ...

buying an ice cream cone").

(5) Staged communicative tasks -- e.g., the respondent assumes the role of interviewer of a supposed monolingual speaker of the target language (Powell, 1975).

(6) Unstaged communication -- videotaping of peer interactions, using a wireless microphone (Brown, Bruck, Shultz, & Walcer, 1976).

Thus, we have an array of different instruments and the literature provides us insights as to how to assess the assessment instruments. What do we do now? Here are some suggestions:

(1) An eclectic approach whereby several different measures are used may provide a closer estimate of a child's English speaking skills than one measure alone.

(2) The measures should be able to pass initial screening with respect to sociocultural and linguistic fairness for the learner. If not, any interpretation of the outcomes should bear this in mind.

(3) Administration procedures should maximize desired effects (positive motivation on the respondent's part) and minimize unwanted ones (e.g., inhibition).

(4) Scoring may profitably involve both discrete-point scoring (e.g., Short Test of Linguistic Skills) and global scoring (e.g., Bilingual Syntax Measure), as well as a blend of quantitative and qualitative assessment (i.e., the social facts of the assessment context). Scores alone may be misleading. As Mehan (1974) notes, "... to conclude that a wrong answer is due to a lack of understanding is misguided, for the answer may come from an alternative, equally valid interpretation" (p.28). Although Mehan's remarks were directed at multiple choice reading items, the analogy could be made to measures

of speaking. In other words, after the test is over, the speaker could become informant in order to help the examiner to better interpret the results. Such a format is particularly helpful when error analysis is performed on the data. For example, the respondent himself may be able to determine whether a deviation was a result of negative transfer from his native language, overgeneralization of the target language, or the influence of a nonstandard variety of the language (Cohen, 1975a; Cohen & Robbins, 1976).

Once measures have been selected, administered, scored, and interpreted, how might the results be utilized? A sensitive battery of measures might do more than simply indicate limitations. It may suggest teachable activities. Perhaps certain linguistic strategies, cognitive patterns, personality dimensions, and attitudes can be engendered or taught formally. For example, it may be fruitful to teach limited speakers to use paraphrase or generalization (analogy) to maintain the flow of speech, to adopt field-independent techniques for avoiding distracting stimuli in the field, and to be more self-assertive (extroverted). But just what should be taught is in need of more extensive empirical evidence. The notion of teaching learners how to learn a language, specifically, to speak it, is an intriguing departure from a previous emphasis on teaching teachers to teach languages.

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