ED322273 1990-05-00 Assessing Bilingual Students for Placement and Instruction. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 65.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

ERIC Identifier: ED322273
Publication Date: 1990-05-00
Author: Ascher, Carol
Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.

Assessing Bilingual Students for Placement and Instruction. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 65.

Testing specialists have understood for some time that educational and psychological tests should never be used alone for any placement or instructional decision, even with students who are proficient in English. However, there is new awareness about the limitations of these instruments for assessing bilingual students. Even a student who speaks English easily, but who comes from a home where another language is spoken, is likely to receive a test score that describes his or her aptitude or achievement somewhat inaccurately. In fact, students who come from homes where both English and Spanish are spoken may be most vulnerable to testing anomalies (Figueroa, 1989).

The number of students designated as "limited English proficient" is growing rapidly. However, because standardized test scores are often categorized by ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanic or Asian American), ignoring the language or languages spoken by the test-takers, the particular difficulties of administering and interpreting tests with bilinguals are often obscured.

The American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (1985) have proposed guidelines for testing linguistic minorities. Their Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing includes warnings that the reliability and validity of tests may be undermined by language differences; that administering an English language test to non-English proficient students will assess only English language proficiency, not a subject domain; that translating tests into a student's native language may subvert the tests' reliability and validity; and that English language proficiency should be determined by more than multiple-choice paper-and- pencil tests. If the procedures recommended in the Standards were followed, researchers suggest that many problems of testing bilinguals would disappear (Valdes & Figueroa, 1989). Unfortunately, in many schools bilingual student testing is conducted in such a manner that test scores actively contribute to the students' problems rather than serve as neutral indicators of their achievement (Figueroa, 1989; Duran, 1988).

THE BILINGUAL MIND

Valdes and Figueroa (1989) point out that bilingualism is the condition of knowing two languages rather than one. Individuals who are bilingual to any extent have two language systems that both overlap and are distinct, and that are relied upon in a variety of ways depending upon the linguistic and communicative demands of everyday settings.

In any given moment or circumstance, any bilingual will have a temporarily stronger language. A bilingual student may have relatively greater fluency with the formal or informal style in either language; or may dream and speak, but not read or write, in one of the languages. Often, too, bilingual students switch back and forth from one language

to another as they speak and think. These variations arise from such circumstances as their age of arrival in the U.S., the language(s) spoken at home and in the neighborhood, the frequency of television watching, and, of course, the language(s) emphasized in their classrooms.

In fact, many new immigrants settle in neighborhoods among others from their country of origin, and after a time may not speak like a "native" in either of their languages. This is because features of the native language are often integrated into the English spoken in, say, a predominantly Hispanic or Chinese neighborhood, at the same time as English features become part of their spoken and even written native language. Similarly, most "bilingual classes" are places where the teacher and students switch back and forth between two languages, forming mental landscapes that are complex and unique mixtures of both language systems.

What is important about all these linguistic patterns for testing is that we do not yet know how to measure the extent to which one of the languages of a bilingual student influences the other, or even how to describe bilingual competence. Bilinguals themselves tend to overrate or underrate their competence in one or the other of the two languages, depending on the language used by most people around them. Further, the conclusions educators may reach about which language is dominant often depend on their focus. If pronunciation is considered, English will seem to suffer from the most interference when compared to the idealized norm; if, conversely, vocabulary is considered, the ethnic or immigrant language will tend to display the greatest amount of interference (Valdes & Figueroa, 1989).

ASSESSING BILINGUAL STUDENTS

In test-taking situations, the switching and other linguistic adaptations of bilinguals create notable shifts from how monolingual English students perform. First, bilinguals process information more slowly in their less familiar language--which accounts for their slower speed of test-taking. Typically, even bilingual students who do well on tests (many Asians, for example) achieve depressed verbal scores in comparison to their non-verbal scores. Second, bilingual students often show curious anomalies: for example, Spanish bilinguals find backward-digit-span tasks in English easier than forward-digit-span tasks. Finally, students with limited English familiarity may be more easily disturbed by noise and other distracting environmental conditions, which may depress their scores on tests (Figueroa, 1989; Valdes & Figueroa, 1989).
Many testing specialists have become sensitive to the problems of testing bilingual individuals. However, because standardized tests in any language remain biased in favor of persons for whom that language is native, low test scores received by bilinguals often are interpreted as evidence of deficits or even disorders. This creates difficulties with every kind of assessment, from tests for English language proficiency, used most often to place students in bilingual classes, to intelligence tests, the prime source of information for special education placement. For example, the language gap in testing

has been a major contributor to the disproportionate numbers of Hispanic bilinguals diagnosed as "mentally retarded" when cut-off scores are used on IQ tests (Duran, 1988). In an often-cited study of Hispanics in Riverside, California, Rueda and Mercer (1985) found that the Hispanic students, who constituted under 10 percent of the school population, comprised 32 percent of the students identified as mentally retarded. In fact, other data from the study suggest that for over 62 percent of the Hispanic students identified as mentally retarded, no symptoms of deficiency were found other than the low IQ test scores (Rueda, 1987, in Duran, 1988).

ACHIEVEMENT, ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, AND

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCEA common argument is that, while students' linguistic complexities are very interesting, all that a test needs to measure is whether the students speak English or how much they have learned in a particular subject area. Unfortunately, however, until a student is at ease in English--which may take as long as seven years--an achievement test is really only a crude test of English competence (Duran, 1989). That is, all knowledge gains in specific subject areas are confused by the students' English language gains.

Existing tests for measuring students' competence in English--English proficiency tests--were developed in the context of formally teaching English as a foreign language. These are paper-and-pencil tests like TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), directed at discovering how much students have learned about the structure, vocabulary, and sound system of English. English proficiency tests do not measure students' active use of English, and so do not adequately assess how well a student will be able to manage in an English classroom. Nor do such tests even agree on what constitutes "proficiency." In fact, so great are the discrepancies between the numbers of children included as Limited English Speaking by different proficiency tests that school districts can actually choose their test depending on whether they want to identify large or small numbers of children who need special help. Finally, although we know that each of a bilingual individual's languages influences the other, these proficiency tests do not measure this influence (Valdes & Figueroa, 1989).

Over the past two decades, sociolinguists have begun to outline an alternate definition of competence in English that focuses on communicative competence, rather than on proficiency. To achieve communicative competence in a classroom, for example, students must understand the vocabulary and grammar of instruction. In addition, they must achieve a range of interactional competencies that extend beyond their knowledge of English, such as understanding when and how to respond to a teacher's questions, or how to ask for clarification (Duran, 1989). This notion of communicative competence involves complex skills; only a few models of successful tests have been created to assess these skills, and they have not been widely implemented (Duran, 1989).

COMMONLY USED OPTIONS FOR ADMINISTERING STANDARDIZED

TESTS TO LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKERSFive options are commonly used in testing Limited English Speakers: nonverbal tests, translated tests, interpreters, tests that are norm-referenced in the primary language, and assessments by bilingual psychologists. The first four have severe limitations (Figueroa, 1989).

Nonverbal tests are the most common procedure used with bilingual students. Unfortunately, nonverbal measures of intelligence predict less reliably than verbal measures, and, despite appearances, may even be hypersensitive to language background.

Translated tests are always different tests, unknown and unfair. While it is not difficult to translate a test, it is extremely difficult--if not impossible--to translate psychometric properties from one language to another. A word in English is simply not the same word in terms of difficulty in Spanish, Hmong, Russian, or Chinese.

For Hispanic children, many educational tests are available in Spanish (often developed in Mexico). However, these tests are for monolingual Spanish students, with little or no sustained exposure to English. When used with students immersed in a predominantly English culture and educational system (even those in a bilingual program) their error rates are unacceptably high (Figueroa, 1989). In fact, scores from different Spanish tests used with any U.S. bilingual student lead to such widely differing diagnoses that they defy any claim to diagnostic validity (Figueroa, 1989; Valdes & Figueroa, 1989).

Both trained and untrained interpreters are widely used in assessment. However, this practice remains risky. The research on interpreters is negligible. Although a number of commercial models exist for training and using interpreters, there is no empirical validation of their suggested procedures.

True bilingual assessment involves evaluating how a student uses his or her two language systems to perform the targeted cognitive tasks. It should be sensitive to issues such as content and processing factors such as speed. Further, an assessment should be capable of comparing performance on tasks across two languages. No universal instruments currently exist for doing this in every domain of assessment. The school psychologist who relies heavily on existing tests in a single language ends up with many scores but no empirical or hypothetical direction for interpreting or diagnosing from them.

Unfortunately, even bilingual counselors, psychologists, and speech pathologists appear to rely heavily on standardized test scores in evaluating Limited English Speakers (Langdon, 1989). Langdon offers A Model Speech and Language

Assessment Protocol for Students with Limited English Proficiency. The protocol includes background information on the students' family, health, and school history; language development history; results of testing; and language samples taken in the classroom and in other situations.

NEW APPROACHES TO TESTING BILINGUAL STUDENTS

Standardized aptitude and achievement tests yield little prescriptive information, even for a student who has never spoken a foreign language. These tests are static; that is, they capture students' capacity to recognize information or solve problems based on skills they already have (Duran, 1988). On the other hand, curriculum-based achievement tests can generate explicit information about the skills and content that a student has yet to master, and they can be combined with instruction that exposes students to a progression of new material.

Recently, a new curriculum-based assessment technique, often worked out with non-native English language speakers and other students experiencing learning difficulties, has been used successfully with American bilinguals. Called dynamic assessment, this technique appears promising for both teaching and testing. Dynamic assessment attempts to measure how well students master new learning and skills with the assistance of a teacher or computer. Students are taken through test-train-test cycles in which the teacher/computer diagnoses their readiness to learn a new task and determines which hints and cues will best promote the new learning. (See Lidz, 1987, for a review of the field of dynamic assessment.)

While dynamic assessment methods are still in their early stages, Padron (1987, in Duran, 1989) found that an assessment and teaching procedures based on dynamic assessment, called reciprocal teaching, was effective in raising achievement scores with Hispanic elementary students.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The limitations of using educational and psychological tests for placement and instruction are increasingly clear. In fact, research suggests that test scores of bilingual students too often underestimate their learning capacity, and that decisions based on these scores frequently result in placements that limit opportunities for learning.

A first step in improving the chances of bilingual students is to improve diagnostic protocols. This means going beyond standardized test scores to collect information in a variety of areas, including students' backgrounds and language development histories, and obtaining language samples from classrooms and other situations.

A second step is creating assessment that is more directly based on curriculum. Although dynamic assessment and other curriculum-based teaching/testing techniques

appear to enhance students' scores on standardized tests, their value goes far beyond this. They suggest that, to the extent that diagnostic tests of competence in the main academic areas can be created, and to the extent that teaching methods appropriate to individual differences can be developed, it should be possible to avoid the selection and labeling process altogether (Brown, Campione, Webber, & McGilly, 1989).

REFERENCES

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education. (1985). Standards for educational and psychological testing. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
Brown, A.L., Campione, J.C., Webber, L.S., & McGilly, K. (in press). Interactive learning environments: A new look at assessment and instruction. In B. Gifford & M.C. O'Connor (Eds.), Future assessments: Changing views of aptitude, achievement, and instruction. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Duran, R.P. (1988). Testing of Hispanic students: Implications for secondary education. Paper prepared for the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Duran, R.P. (1989, October). Assessment and instruction of at- risk Hispanic students. Exceptional Children, 56 (2), 154-158.

Figueroa, R.A. (1989, October). Psychological testing of linguistic-minority students: Knowledge gaps and regulations. Exceptional Children, 56 (2), 145-152.

Langdon, H.W. (1989, October). Language disorder or difference? Assessing the language skills of Hispanic students. Exceptional Children, 56 (2), 160-167.

Lidz, C. (Ed). (1987). Dynamic assessment. New York: Guilford Press.

Rueda, R., & Mercer, J. (1985). A predictive analysis of decision-making practices with limited English proficient handicapped students. Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. (ED 266 590)

Valdes, G., & Figueroa, R. (1989, October). The nature of bilingualism and the nature of testing: Towards the development of a coherent research agenda. Prepared for the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley, & University of California, Davis.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under OERI contract no. RI88062013.

The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

—

Title: Assessing Bilingual Students for Placement and Instruction. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 65.
Note: This publication was developed with funding from the National Committee on Public Policy.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Target Audience: Researchers
Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Teachers College, Box 40, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (free).
Descriptors: Achievement Tests, Aptitude Tests, Bilingual Students, Educational Assessment, Educational Research, Elementary Secondary Education, Limited English Speaking, Literature Reviews, Standardized Tests, Student Placement, Test Interpretation, Testing, Testing Problems
Identifiers: Curriculum Based Assessment, ERIC Digests
###

—

[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]