



## The Basic Framework for a **Bilingual Psycho- Education Evaluation**

Bilingual psycho-educational evaluation is a complex and often confusing process that can intimidate the most experienced evaluation professional. This article presents a basic evaluation framework that can provide structure and sense to the bilingual psycho-educational evaluation process. It is important to note, however, that there are a myriad of individual circumstances that can require an alteration to the framework or even a different process altogether.

Federal and most state regulations provide evaluation professionals with virtually no guidance on how to determine language dominance and why it is necessary, when and how to perform a bilingual academic assessment, and when and how to do cognitive testing in a language other than English. This article helps answer some of the more basic questions faced by evaluation professionals conducting bilingual special education evaluations.

Essentially, a bilingual psycho-educational evaluation has three major components: (1) oral language proficiency and dominance

testing; (2) achievement testing, and; (3) cognitive testing. Some or all of these components may be conducted in two languages. The language or languages of each of these three components is dictated by the individual student's language exposure, language dominance, and history of language of academic instruction.

### **Language Proficiency and Dominance Testing**

Language proficiency and dominance testing should be the initial step in the evaluation process. Language proficiency and dominance testing attempts to answer two questions. What is this student's level of proficiency in English and in the native language? Which of the two languages is stronger?

Proficiency and dominance testing involves much more than simply administering standardized oral language tests. Information on the student's oral language ability should be gathered from the parent(s), teacher(s), and student. Results of the school district

proficiency testing and information from the Home Language Survey should be considered. The evaluation professional will also want to review the student's history of language exposure and use, as well as school history and language of instruction. Informal testing and criterion-referenced testing are also valuable and often critical sources of information. Lastly, standardized oral language testing will yield information on the relative standing of the student in relation to native speakers of that language.

In standardized oral language testing, the evaluation professional can assess the proficiency or fluency level in the student's two languages, and then compare the two levels to help determine dominance. This process can best be accomplished using parallel oral language tests because doing otherwise can easily result in comparing tests that measure different aspects of oral language. Oral language tests that are not parallel (2 languages) may be acceptable for assessing proficiency levels, but are a significant obstacle in determining language dominance.

*Karina is a 3rd grade, nine year old bilingual (English/Spanish) student referred for special education testing because of poor academic progress in reading and writing. She was born in Mexico and attended kindergarten, first, and second grade in her native country. Her family moved to the United States two years ago and Karina repeated the second grade but this time in an English only instructional setting. She was placed in the third grade the next school year also in an all English general education classroom.*

*Karina was administered parallel oral language tests in English and Spanish. Her performance on the oral language cluster suggested an age equivalent of 8-8 and a standard score of 92 in Spanish and an age equivalent of 6-3 and a standard score of 59 in English. ORAL LANGUAGE (Spanish) AE=8-8 SS=92 ORAL LANGUAGE (English) AE=6-3 SS=59. Her assessed proficiency level was indicated to be average in Spanish and very limited in English. Karina demonstrated Spanish dominance. Dominance was determined by reviewing information from the student, parent, teacher, and school records and by comparing English and Spanish language scores from the formal testing. Observations during testing and analysis of responses revealed . . . to be continued on page 46.*

In the example above, parallel tests were administered. However, for students with a definite stronger language, parallel tests may not be as important because determining dominance is not a critical issue.

If tests are unavailable in the student's native language, informal assessment measures (i.e. language samples, story telling, and oral story retelling) will be necessary to help in the determination of language proficiency and dominance. For example, a language sample in English and the native language may be obtained. The evaluation professional looks at the two transcribed language samples for complexity of sentence structure, use of different verb tenses, level of vocabulary, cohesiveness of ideas, etc. For more in-depth information regarding how to obtain language samples, consult your school's speech and language pathologist.

After all information has been gathered and testing has been completed, the evaluation professional interprets all this data in light of the student's years of exposure to each of the languages and the type, quality, and appropriateness of the educational programming, especially language programming. Additionally, the evaluation

professional must be knowledgeable of the second language acquisition process, including the number of years an average individual takes to acquire a conversational level of English, number of years to acquire an academic level of English, and the impact to the native language when a second language is introduced.

## Academic Testing

The following recommendations are a result from reviews of special education hearings, as well as research into education services provided for linguistically diverse students and the education services' effectiveness in the development of the student's English and native language skills. Additionally, these recommendations stem from extensive first-hand experience of this author and basic logic.

To begin with, academic testing in two languages does not necessarily require parallel tests, although parallel tests do make the test interpretation more straightforward. When conducting English and Spanish academic testing, for example, the evaluation professional interprets the English test results in terms of the student's educational background in the English language. Likewise, the Spanish test results are interpreted given the student's educational background in that language. Except for general information purposes, there is no reason to statistically compare English to Spanish academic scores.

For all students requiring an academic evaluation, an English evaluation should be attempted. An academic screening may serve for students who have received limited or no formal instruction in the English language, basically for baseline information and documentation. Best practice, however, dictates that if English language instruction has been given for one year or more, a comprehensive English academic evaluation must be conducted.

If the student has received instruction in the native language for one year or more, a comprehensive native language academic evaluation (if tests are available) should be conducted unless there is sufficient evidence that such an evaluation is not appropriate (i.e. a high school student who received one year of bilingual education back in the first grade.). An academic screening may serve for students who have received limited instruction or who have received no formal instruction in the native language. If the academic screening reveals that the student has significant academic skills, the academic evaluation can easily be expanded to a more comprehensive evaluation.

If assessment instruments are not available in the student's native language, informal assessment (i.e. student relates an event or tells a story; student reads a passage in a grade level book in his/her native language, or students writes sentences, a paragraph, or a story in his/her native language), as well as parent and student information can provide an estimate of the student's academic ability.

Academic test results must be carefully interpreted in light of the student's years of instruction in that language, opportunities to learn, and types and quality of special language programs attended. To adequately interpret academic test results, the evaluation professional must be aware of the different special language programs available and their effectiveness for linguistically diverse students' academic achievement.

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# Language

On a standardized Spanish achievement test, Karina demonstrated the following grade equivalents (G.E.) and standard score (SS).

Basic Reading (Spanish)	GE=3.0	SS=90
Reading Comprehension (Spanish)	GE=2.9	SS=88
Broad Mathematics (Spanish)	GE=3.4	SS=94
Mathematics Reasoning (Spanish)	GE=2.9	SS=90
Basic Writing Skills (Spanish)	GE=2.8	SS=87
Written Expression (Spanish)	GE=3..2	SS=94

Test results were interpreted in light of Karina's formal academic instruction in Spanish that ended in the 2nd grade when her family moved to the United States. Assessed academic functioning in Spanish appears to be generally commensurate with Karina's educational exposure in that language.

On a standardized English achievement test, Karina demonstrated the following scores:

Basic Reading (English)	GE=1.6	SS=68
Reading Comprehension (English)	GE=1.2	SS=60
Basic Mathematics (English)	GE=3.9	SS=94
Mathematics Reasoning (English)	GE=2.1	SS=78
Basic Writing Skills (English)	GE=K.9	SS=60
Written Expression (English)	GE=1.6	SS=65

Given that Karina began her formal academic instruction in English at the age of eight in the second grade knowing no English and that she has only received approximately two years of English academic exposure, Karina's current academic functioning is considered to be generally commensurate with her educational background. The higher scores on the math calculation tests reflect the low language demands of those tasks, an indication that oral language is probably significantly impacting her scores on the tasks with high language demands. A comparison of English oral language skills (AE 6-3) to the high language demand academic tasks (GE 1.6, 1.2, 2.1, K.9, and 1.6) suggests that Karina is functioning academically at or slightly above her assessed English oral language level.

To meet eligibility criteria for a specific learning disability, bilingual students must demonstrate educational need **and** a significant discrepancy in **both** languages (if testing in both languages was necessary) in the **same** academic area using standardized assessment instruments. In addition, the discrepancy must not be primarily the result of environmental issues, cultural factors, or economic disadvantage. It is important to document sufficient detail to judge the appropriateness of the eligibility decision.

## Cognitive Testing

Cognitive/intelligence testing must be conducted in the student's (A) dominant language if dominance can be determined, (B) native language if dominance cannot be determined, (C) or both languages if deemed necessary by the evaluation professional. Typically in cognitive testing, the evaluation professional chooses one language as the more appropriate language to administer the test and testing occurs in that single language.

If instruments in the native language of the student are currently not available, if the student has a significant documented language delay, or if the student is hearing impaired, consider the use of a nonverbal or performance test in conjunction with data from informal measures to support formal test results. The exclusive use of non-verbal cognitive measures must be used with caution because limiting evaluation to non-verbal or performance measures can fail to identify genuine learning problems in verbal areas that require special education intervention. The reason for omitting verbal measures should be documented in the report and at the IEP meeting.

*The results of the language proficiency and dominance testing and background information indicated that Karina is bilingual in English and Spanish, dominant in Spanish. She, therefore, was administered the bilingual scale of a Spanish cognitive measure. The bilingual scale is a special combination of tests specifically developed for students who have had active exposure to two or more languages and Karina's linguistic background suggests that this accommodation is appropriate. Karina demonstrated average cognitive functioning with an age equivalent of 9-5 and a standard score of 98.*

A final, but important concern in cognitive testing of bilingual students is that simply testing in the dominant language does not necessarily accurately represent the cognitive abilities of the bilingual student. Cognitive testing in the stronger language is clearly preferable to testing in the weaker language, but the evaluation professional must still carefully interpret the test results, keeping in mind that they may not adequately represent the student for several reasons. One reason is that the dominant language may not have been fully developed, as in the case of Karina. Her Spanish language skills were not developed or even maintained by the school in the last two years which could have negatively impacted Karina's performance on the Spanish cognitive measure. Additionally, the Spanish cognitive test may have been developed with Spanish monolingual subjects, as English cognitive tests are, and consequently the population on which the test was developed is not fully representative of the student being tested. There are several assessment measures that have taken into account both of these important issues and have provided some accommodations such as a bilingual scale. A bilingual scale on a cognitive measure allows individualization of the student's assessment by providing a test battery specifically tailored for a bilingual background.

The framework provided in this article attempts to give guidance and structure to evaluation professionals to successfully meet the challenges of the complexities in bilingual testing. As initially cautioned in the opening paragraph, there will be many student-centered reasons why an evaluation professional would need to deviate from this framework. Evaluation professionals are strongly encouraged to fully gather pertinent information on their students and then accommodate the formal testing to the individual needs of each student. ■

# Testing