

ISPA Professional Practice Guidance: English Learner Assessment

The overall purpose of this ISPA guidance document is to provide information regarding the professional practices tied to appropriately referring an EL student to the special education referral committee. The two main goals are: 1) Discuss issues related to evaluation and 2) Provide some general guidelines for evaluation and test interpretation. The information presented below has been primarily drawn from the NASP Position Statement (2015), the ISBE Serving English Learners with Disabilities Resource Manual (2002), the NCSPA Professional Practices -- Referring and Evaluating LEP Students (2004) document.

As described in the NASP Position Statement (2015), in U.S. school systems, ELs are underserved and at-risk for disproportionate representation in special education. All school psychologists are responsible for providing equitable and culturally responsive services to students and families. Monolingual school psychologists should utilize bilingual school psychologists when appropriate, but also develop competencies in working with EL students because it is ultimately the duty and responsibility of all school psychologists to have the training required to work with all populations.

Best practices in the provision of school psychology services when working with ELs require using culturally and linguistically appropriate methods, including assessment in the language that will provide the most useful data to inform interventions, as well as service delivery in the language that best meets the students' needs. Best practices also require training on the developmental processes of language acquisition and acculturation, and how a student's development in these two domains can affect academics, standardized test performance, social-emotional functioning, and the effectiveness of instructional strategies and interventions. In order to prevent the disproportionate representation of EL students in special education, all school psychologists must consider the cultural and linguistic developmental trajectory of each individual student.

Examining the Learning Environment

Five major aspects of the learning environment be examined in relation to language diverse students (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988):

1. teacher behavior, knowledge and attitudes, including knowledge of second language acquisition process, expectations for language diverse students, and experience with diverse populations; *f*
2. instruction, including the use of strategies known to be effective for second language learners and knowledge of literacy development; *f*
3. exposure to the curriculum, including attention to pre-requisite skills and whether the curriculum was presented in a language the student could understand; *f*
4. student characteristics, including previous academic experiences and language dominance and proficiency; and
5. evaluation of instruction, including the appropriateness of evaluative techniques for ELs.

After examining the learning environment, the school psychologist must determine whether: (a) the student's problems exist across settings; (b) the student's difficulties are present in both languages; and (c) the student has not made satisfactory progress despite having received competent instruction (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988).

The student should be referred for a special education assessment only when (1) sociocultural factors are not the primary contributors to the student's learning and/or behavioral problems and (2) the student has demonstrated insufficient progress in response to appropriate interventions and ESL instruction (NCSPA, 2004).

Language Screening and Evaluation

Critical to distinguishing learning disabilities from linguistic differences is the assessment of a student's Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). In addition to evaluating interpersonal communication skills, assessments should also measure the literacy-related aspects of language. CALP development is affected by age, ability level, previous schooling, language(s) of instruction, cultural experiences, and amount of exposure to the native language and English. The language proficiency results will assist in determining whether to use an English test or a test in the student's native language.

Language screening should address the student's proficiency in both his/her native language and English (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). Blatchley & Lau list two key questions to answer:

1. *Are there signs of language disorder in the native language that may impede English language learning?*
2. *Are the student's English skills within the expected level, given his or her years of formal schooling and literacy in native language?*

According to Cummins (1984), students learn basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in about 2 years upon entering a new language environment. However, learning deeper, more abstract, and complex language involved in conceptual learning (CALP) takes much longer. Research suggests that EL students require 4–7 years of formal schooling in order to acquire an average level of academic language if they have had the support of native language instruction. If they have had only English instruction, the typical EL student will need 7–10 years to attain average achievement, if they ever do (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

In the article *Culturally Competent Screening and Special Education Referral: A Systemic Approach*. Blatchley & Lau (2010) also continue to highlight the importance of an in-depth screening and provide essential information through an overview of screening approaches towards EL students. See link in resources/reference page.

In summary, *“the primary focus is to draw an accurate picture of the student's functioning within the context of his or her cultural and linguistic background. Armed with this information, school staff can develop appropriate universal and targeted interventions for at-risk students. Finally, if there are signs of possible disability (e.g., persistent resistance to appropriate interventions), then the student can be referred for formal assessment, possibly leading to special education services”* (Blatchley & Lau, 2010, p. 5).

A second NASP article from Blatchley and Lau (2010), *“Culturally Competent Assessment of English Learners for Special Education Services,”* also offers essential information regarding appropriate professional practices when assessing students learning English as a second language. See link in resources/reference page.

Accommodations

Accommodations may need to be made to the standardized procedures used to administer tests for ELs in order to better obtain information and more validly reflecting the student's mastery of the intended constructs. When considering accommodations, two questions should be examined: 1) What is being measured if conditions are changed from standardization? 2) What is being measured if the conditions remain the same? The decision to use an accommodation or not should be determined by the goal of collecting test information that accurately and fairly represents the knowledge and skills of the student on the intended constructs (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000). Accommodations may include:

- paraphrasing or rewording instructions,
- repeating directions,
- using familiar vocabulary,
- providing a demonstration of how test tasks are to be performed,
- reading test items to the student,
- allowing the student to respond verbally rather than in writing,
- accepting student responses in any language

Results should be cautiously interpreted and all alterations made to the testing procedures must be fully documented in the evaluation report.

When students are acquiring a second language, differences in academic skills, behavior, and social skills can occur compared to their English speaking peers. Due to such differences, *“English Learners (ELs) are therefore at risk for referral for special services including special education”* (Blatchley and Lau, 2010). When EL students make little or no progress despite additional supports and special education services are considered for EL students, educators and school personnel are, *“urged to take a broad, ecological perspective, collecting data through a multidimensional, multi-task approach and interpreting results within the context of the students’ unique cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds”* (Blatchley and Lau, 2010)

In summary, Blatchley & Lau state, *“prior to initiating a nondiscriminatory assessment of an EL student, school personnel should implement careful screening and appropriate classroom instructional and behavioral interventions. Practices that address students’ performance in the context of their culture and language backgrounds and their response to appropriate instruction will help ensure fair, effective, and efficient assessment and intervention procedures for EL students”* (pg. 7, 2010). Such article provides additional information regarding special education services for EL students. Using an ‘LEP checklist’ like the one provided by the North Carolina School Psychology Association (Appendix A), can help the assessment, intervention and/or problem solving teams determine if a student should be referred to the special education team for further assessments/evaluations.

Appendix A
Referring and Evaluating LEP Students Checklist

Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____
School: _____ Date: _____

Has the prereferral intervention team done the following? (involve English as a Second Language teacher, Speech/Language Pathologist, and School Psychologist)

- 1. Waited a sufficient period of time for adjustment and adaptation to the school setting (usually 2 years of consistent English instruction unless global delays are evident).
- 2. Administered the English proficiency test to assess reading, writing, listening, and speaking within the last six months.
Results: _____
- 3. Established the most proficient language for assessment? What is the most proficient language? _____
- 4. Identified cultural differences and how they impact school performance.
- 5. Met with parents, using an interpreter if necessary, to discuss their suggestions for helping the student and to obtain information regarding background information.
- 6. Implemented regular classroom interventions developed in consultation with the ESL teacher and documented the results.
- 7. Provided hearing/vision exams and evaluated the results.
- 8. Pinpointed the student's academic strengths and weaknesses in both languages if possible. (Please attach work samples to illustrate).
- 9. Systematically observed the student in a variety of interactions with peers and adults in different settings.
- 10. Systematically compared and contrasted the student's home and school behaviors, language use, and confidence.
- 11. Provided EL instruction and documented the rate of learning.
- 12. Did the student receive formal reading instruction in his/her native language? _____ If yes... how many years/up to what grade? _____
- 13. If relevant, has reading in the native language been assessed? _____ If yes, what is the student's reading level in his/her native language? _____
- 14. Language used at Tier 1: _____ For how long? _____
Provide evidence of student performance.
- 15. Language used at Tier 2: _____ For how long? _____
Provide evidence of student performance (description of intervention and progress monitoring data).
- 16. Language used at Tier 3: _____ For how long? _____
Provide evidence of student performance (description of intervention and progress monitoring data).

Resources/ References

- Blatchley, L. A., & Lau, M. Y. (2010). Culturally Competent Screening and Special Education Referral: A Systemic Approach. *Communique*, 38(7). National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/communique/issues/volume-38-issue-7/culturally-competent-screening-and-special-education-referral-a-systemic-approach>
- Blatchley, L. A., & Lau, M. Y. (2010). Culturally Competent Assessment of English Language Learners for Special Education Services. *Communique*, 38(7). National Association of School Psychologists. Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/communique/issues/volume-38-issue-7/culturally-competent-assessment-of-english-language-learners-for-special-education-services>
- Garcia, S., & Ortiz, A. (1988). Preventing inappropriate referrals of language minority students to special education. Occasional papers in Bilingual Education. NCBE New Focus No. 5. Silver Springs, MD: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- ISBE Illinois Special Education Eligibility and Entitlement Procedures and Criteria within a Response to Intervention (RtI) Framework: A Guidance Document Illinois State Board of Education Special Education and Support Services Updated August 2012 - <http://www.isbe.net/spec-ed/conf/2013/pdf/session15g.pdf>
- Lee., C. J., & NCSPA Professional Practices. (2004). Referring and Evaluating Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students For Programs and Services For Children With Special Needs. North Carolina School Psychologists Association. Retrieved from <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/armisteadl/SchoolPsychologyResources/attachments/NCSPALEPPProfessionalPractic.pdf>