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Assessing Language-Minority Students.

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Today, 15% to 20% of our schoolchildren speak a foreign language at home, and their number is growing rapidly. By definition, these limited-English proficient (LEP) students do not speak English as their primary language, and their culture frequently differs from that of most Americans. These differences in language and culture influence how LEP students do in school and on the various tests we generally use to evaluate students.

However, we cannot cluster all LEP students into a single, identifiable group. For example, while we may view Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Central Americans all as Hispanics, each group has significant demographic, behavioral, and geographic differences (see Geisinger, 1992).

This article discusses important aspects of assessing LEP students:

- understanding the role of culture,
- evaluating and selecting tests,
- determining the validity of those tests, and
- administering tests.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CULTURE?

Many language-minority students emerge from cultures that differ from the dominant culture in American society. According to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing: "Behavior that may appear eccentric or that may be judged negatively in one culture may be appropriate in another. For example, children from some cultures may be reluctant to establish rapport with unknown adults. They may be trained to speak to adults only in response to specific questions....Thus, in a testing situation such children may respond to an adult who is probing for elaborate speech with only short phrases or by shrugging their shoulders' (American Educational Research Association, et al., 1985, p. 74).

Therefore, we need to understand how cultural background influences LEP students' approaches to test taking. Especially with tests measuring and interpreting personality, we may need to consider the student's individual level of acculturation. Acculturation is the process of changing attitudes and behavior after living for some time in a different culture.

HOW SHOULD WE EVALUATE AND SELECT TESTS?

When evaluating tests for LEP students, we can use many of the same criteria used for evaluating tests for all students. For the explicit use intended, tests should be

- properly developed,
- normed,
- reliable, and
- validated.

Norm samples should include adequate numbers of language-minority students, and reliability and validation (criterion-related or construct validation-related) research should include adequate numbers of LEP students. Besides the evidence to justify using the test with all students, separate evidence should document the reliability and validity of the test scores of LEP students.

In addition, test publishers need to document their efforts to ensure the fairness of their tests--for example:

- having sensitivity panels review test questions early in development,

- documenting evidence showing the effective use of the test with LEP students, and
- citing differential validation research showing that the test is equally valid and appropriate for use with language-majority and -minority students.

Test developers generally investigate the bias of individual test questions as well as the whole test. Some test developers also provide useful guidelines on how to use test scores in certain contexts.

HOW VALID ARE TESTS LIKELY TO BE WITH LEP STUDENTS?

Only limited evidence addresses the validity of tests with LEP students. Pennock-Roman (1990) has studied the use of various tests of admission to higher education with language-minority students, and her results apply for many uses of educational tests. In general, she concludes that tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) appear valid for most language-minority students. She also indicates, however, that these results hold only for the short term because students' language abilities generally improve over time. For students with very weak English language skills, tests such as the SAT probably will not validly predict success. She also found that tests of educational achievement in Spanish improved the prediction of college grades over and above the SAT.

Language-proficiency tests play an important role in the valid assessment of LEP students, and educators often use these tests to identify students likely to benefit from bilingual education (Duran, 1989). Perhaps we don't need to administer such tests when LEP students succeed on tests in English. But when LEP students struggle with tests in English, we need to routinely administer and interpret language-proficiency tests, perhaps along with achievement tests in students' native language.

Unfortunately, many language-proficiency tests are flawed. For example, they commonly test students in a single modality--a paper-and-pencil test that ignores spoken and oral comprehension (see Duran, 1989; Oller and Damico, 1991). Multimodal measurement is important because of the longer time it takes to acquire language proficiency needed for academic learning than for ordinary communication.

HOW SHOULD WE ADMINISTER TESTS TO LEP STUDENTS?

Figueroa (1990) suggests that, in accordance with PL 94-142, we should assess linguistic minorities in both English and their native language. This ideal rarely is possible, however. Few tests are available in languages other than English. Further, test developers cannot simply translate a test from one language to another; they must also independently establish reliability, validity, and norms for the translated test (AERA et al., 1985).

In all testing situations, we need to understand the cultures that test takers come from so we can consider their behavior from their cultural perspective. Under the best conditions, we should be able to communicate in students' native languages when necessary.

Researchers have recommended other ways to test LEP students. Figueroa (1990) has suggested using non-verbal tests of intelligence instead of English-language-dependent tests; however, such tests frequently do not predict future educational performance as effectively as verbal tests. Duran (1989) has advocated using a test-teach-test paradigm: After testing to ensure that an LEP student does not know a particular concept, a test administrator teaches the student the concept and then tests the student again. But this technique is hard to quantify, standardize, and validate, as well as being time-consuming. Still, it may informally describe a student's learning ability.

CONCLUSION

Research findings often drive assessment practices. But now, driven by practical needs, we are beginning to establish sound practices for testing LEP students. Because the LEP population is growing so rapidly, it has received increasing attention. Educational testing is particularly important because of the practical policy questions facing educators. For example, policy questions have led to legal battles over the disproportionate numbers of LEP students placed in remedial education classes (e.g., Childs, 1990; Elliott, 1987).

In 1985, three professional associations published a new edition of the standards for testing, which for the first-time addressed the testing of language minorities. By adhering to sound and professionally accepted testing practices, we will continue to make progress in testing LEP students.

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