

LANGUAGE and ASSESSMENT

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ?** *In what ways is language both a tool and a target of assessment?*
 - ?** *In what ways should assessment of English language learners be modified to reflect linguistic and cultural considerations?*
 - ?** *How is assessment (mis)used to distinguish between language deficiency and language difficulty in English language learners?*
-

Language is both a target and a tool of assessment. In the case of children acquiring English as a second language, teachers use two types of assessment: they evaluate language in terms that correspond to educational standards in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and they also assess mastery of content area material, a process that often takes place through language but is also largely an assessment of an individual's language proficiency. Language specialists using formal assessments evaluate students' attainment of different aspects of language, including syntax (grammar), vocabulary, pronunciation, ability to use language appropriately in different circumstances (pragmatics), and sometimes writing skills. Both types of assessment are necessary to understanding students' language proficiency.

Assessing Language Proficiency

Understanding a student's language proficiency requires evaluating the student in several settings and evaluating multiple ways of using language. Formal tests administered by specialists may be used for placement purposes or to assess progress in language development in English; however, other sources, such as parent interviews and teacher observations, can help give a full picture of a student's language use. This full picture cannot be developed by a single test. Below, we pose sets of questions pertaining to three important aspects of language proficiency: communication outside the classroom, language in school, and relative proficiency with English and the home language.

Communication outside the classroom

- How successful is the student in communicating with peers in a social setting (like the playground)?
- Is he or she able to use English to accomplish intentions (such as sharing equipment, getting someone to work or play with him or her, getting an answer to a question)?
- How well does he or she communicate at home, according to family members?
- What language does the student prefer to use in these situations?
- Does he or she use both the first language and English successfully?
- Is the student able to communicate his or her needs to both children and adults?

Language use in school

- How well-developed is the student’s “academic” vocabulary (related to school subjects)?
- Does the student successfully use English to learn academic subjects?
- What kinds of support does the student need in order to engage in an academic discussion (bearing in mind culture-based discourse preferences)?
- How proficient is the student at academic writing tasks?
- Is there a gap between oral proficiency and reading or writing proficiency?

Relative proficiency in English and the home language

- How does the student’s academic vocabulary in his or her first language compare to that in English?
- What is known about the student’s literacy (reading and writing) in his or her first language?
- How does the student’s grammatical proficiency in English compare with that of his or her native, English-speaking peers?
- Does the student have particular kinds of problems (e.g., with verb tenses, plurals, possessives)?
- Is the student comfortable using both the first language and English and is he or she able to select appropriate times for both (e.g., using first language in small-group discussions where others speak it and using English in the larger group or on assignments and assessments)?

As these questions suggest, a classroom teacher is in an excellent position to observe a great deal more about a student’s language proficiency and use than a specialist who may see the student only for testing. Teachers need to be aware of a student’s level of academic language proficiency and, in particular, the student’s vocabulary development in academic subjects—something that can affect comprehension of both oral instructions and texts. Ideally, a classroom teacher with students who are still acquiring English will have the support of bilingual or ESL staff, whose observations can be pooled with his or her own to arrive at a valid assessment of students’ language proficiency. It is always advisable to assess the student in both her first language and in English, particularly when the student’s first language development is still being supported or when a child is just entering school. **Figure 1** on page 80 is a checklist that a teacher can use as an aid in assessing students’ language proficiency in English.

FIGURE 1

Interpersonal and Academic Language Skills Checklist

Name:	Date:	
<i>Directions: Please check skills that have been observed at an appropriate level in either English or the non-English language.</i>		
	ENGLISH LANGUAGE	NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Contextualized/Noncognitively demanding:		
1. Answers basic questions appropriately.		
2. Exchanges common greetings.		
3. Follows general classroom directions.		
4. Participates in routine school activities.		
5. Describes classroom objects or people.		
6. Gives classroom commands to peers.		
7. Participates in sharing time.		
8. Retells a familiar story.		
9. Initiates and maintains a conversation.		
10. Follows along during oral reading.		
Decontextualized/Noncognitively demanding:		
11. Decodes fluently.		
12. Reads noncognitively demanding information (e.g., notes, signs, directions, simple sentences, etc.).		
13. Writes words and simple sentences.		
14. Generates simple sentences.		
15. Writes from dictation.		

	ENGLISH LANGUAGE	NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Contextualized/Cognitively demanding:		
16. Follows specific directions for academic tasks.		
17. Uses terms for temporal and spatial concepts (e.g., first, last; top, bottom; left, right; etc.).		
18. Asks/answers questions regarding academic topics.		
19. Understands contextualized academic content.		
20. Reads stories for literal comprehension.		
Decontextualized/Cognitively demanding:		
21. Distinguishes main ideas from details (oral).		
22. Predicts conclusions after listening to story.		
23. Understands lectures on academic content.		
24. Uses language to reason, analyze, synthesize.		
25. Participates in academic discussions.		
26. Reads content area information for comprehension.		
27. Uses glossary, index, appendices, etc.		
28. Writes meaningful short paragraphs.		
29. Uses correct language mechanics.		
30. Writes coherent stories or reports.		

(Adapted from O'Malley, 1997)

Language Factors, Content Mastery, and Assessment

Accurate assessment of children's language proficiency is critical in order to make valid interpretations about their academic progress. This is important because learning and demonstrating content mastery are frequently dependent upon language proficiency. Even so-called nonverbal tests often require that a test taker employ mental language to conceptualize the problem or hold certain ideas in memory (Oller, 1992; Roth, 1978). A student may have met requirements for English-only instruction but still takes longer to process ideas in English than in her first language. For this reason, timed tests or time-limited assessments of any kind may penalize an English language learner (Ascher, 1990). Sometimes the directions on a test are ambiguous or require close parsing of complex syntax. This is troublesome because if a student does not frame a problem correctly from the outset, his or her solution is likely to be flawed (Duran, 1985).

In addition, we know from research that the vocabulary of students still acquiring English is likely to be less elaborate than that of a native speaker. Such a student may know that "buckle" means "a metal belt fastener" but not that it can mean "to cave in" (either figuratively or literally— as "to buckle at the knees"). And, of course, grasping common idioms such as "at a low ebb," "music to my ears," or "out of step" may take a long time for second language learners, making them appear to lag behind. When a student performs poorly on an academic assessment, we often simply do not know the degree to which the performance is due to poor learning versus inadequate mastery of language (Garcia & Pearson, 1994; Hamayan & Damico, 1991).

Performance assessments, or those that demand an extended response, often call upon multiple, high-level language skills. **Figure 2** on page 83 demonstrates this fact.

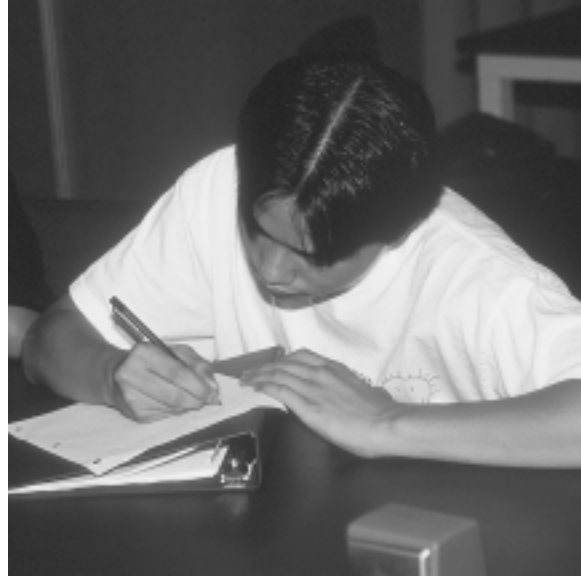


FIGURE 2

Language Factors in Assessment

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY*	LANGUAGE DEMANDS
<p><i>Write a report to a friend who was sick today, explaining to her the science experiment you did and how you did it. (Elementary writing task following a classroom science assessment)</i></p>	<p><i>Recount a multistep past event, sequencing and reinterpreting information; assume role of the teacher to a nonpresent audience. Requires considering what recipient already knows, level of detail he or she needs to comprehend.</i></p>
<p><i>Tell us anything else about your understanding of this story—what it means to you, what it makes you think about in your own life, or anything that relates to your reading of it. (Segment of an elementary reading assessment)</i></p>	<p><i>Give account of own experience(s), linking experience(s) to text, elaborating story comprehension.</i></p>
<p><i>Imagine that you are a staff writer for a small magazine. One day you are given your “big chance.” You are asked to write a final scene of an incomplete story. (Taken from a high school writing task)</i></p>	<p><i>Complete an account (a story) following prescribed format; comprehend and analyze the story so that the new segment makes sense; take on the voice of another author, maintaining style.</i></p>

* Tasks are adapted from examples provided by the California Department of Education (Estrin, 1993).

Teachers can evaluate the difficulty and appropriateness of assessment (and instruction) by asking some questions:

- What components of language arts are involved in the activity, and how competent is the student with each one?
- How complex are the directions for undertaking the task? (Consider sentence structures and length, specialized vocabulary, length and complexity of text, dependence on small relational words such as “before,” “after,” “if...then,” “because,” etc.)
- How flexible is the task in terms of its requirements for language use? Are there alternative ways of expressing understanding or representing information given in language (drawings vs. essays, for example)?
- Even though the task appears to be nonverbal, what kinds of hidden language demands does it have (for example, for problem representation)?
- How can the task be facilitated or mediated? Can additional explanation be offered? Is the student allowed to use a dictionary or other tool?
- How much decontextualized language is being used, or how much will the student have to produce (demands of reading, writing especially)? Does the topic provide any bridges to student experience?
- How many different language functions must the student “pull together” to perform a complex, integrated task—and where might the process break down for a student who is still learning English or who has limited mastery of language functions?
- How cognitively demanding does the task appear to be, judging from what is known about a student’s language proficiency and previous educational experience?
- To what degree does a language use or an associated genre match the student’s cultural experience with that use or genre?

(Adapted from Farr & Trumbull, 1997)

Because language factors may cloud the picture of academic achievement, we must develop assessments that minimize this confusion; we must develop a way to mediate the administration of assessments so that they elicit performances that reveal the true learning of students in subject areas. In terms of evaluating student performance, teachers also need to determine which kinds of student errors indicate learning problems and which simply indicate normal developmental stages along the way to language mastery. Much assessment is done through writing, and while it is natural to notice student errors in writing (whether writing is the object of assessment or the vehicle for assessing learning in another subject area), not all errors merit the attention they get in scoring (Leki, 1992; Valdés, 1991).

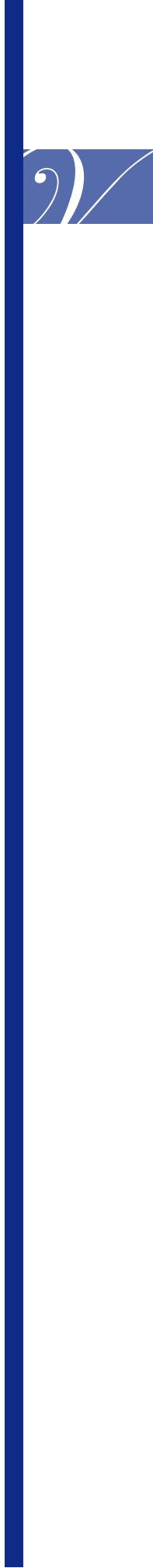
Criteria need to be established for what should count as a serious error. For instance, even though omission of articles (as in “My family had picnic this weekend”) may grate on the ears of many English teachers, this particular error is relatively trivial. In addition, when teachers are familiar with students’ first languages, they can look at student work with an understanding of first language transfer rather than focusing unduly on errors (Sweedler-Brown, 1993). Many Asian languages do not use articles at all, and even advanced English speakers and writers may continue to struggle with similar language issues.

Assessment as a Cultural Event

As with other areas of education, assessment is embedded in cultural context (Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995). There are accepted ways of evaluating student progress or child development in every culture, but these ways differ from one culture to the next. Immigrant students, in particular, may take some time to understand the norms of assessment in U.S. classrooms; the same may be true for American Indian students growing up in traditional communities (Deyhle, 1987). For this reason, it is important to use a variety of assessment techniques and formats—including informal observation as well as a range of more formal measures—with nonmainstream students. The following vignette illustrates some problems with informal assessment and the complexities of understanding the performance of a student from a culture different from dominant U.S. school culture.

VIGNETTE: Hermana May Understand, but I Can't Tell

Hermana came from Palau, an island republic in the Pacific about 700 miles east of the Philippines, to a first-grade classroom in Honolulu earlier this year. She's staying with an older sister and brother-in-law. Earlier today I read the class a story that has always captured their imagination, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. As I read, Hermana sat quietly, eyes down. I remember thinking, "Is she interested? Has she put herself into the story?" It was easy to tell with the others. I could almost feel Sam's interest as he wiggled, frowned, and smiled along with the story. I've been trying to get a sense of Hermana's understanding while I read. I decided to try this book because it's never failed me before. When I called on Hermana and asked her how she liked the story, she barely spoke. "Good." She said it so quietly that no one else heard. When I asked how she'd feel if she were the boy in the story, she looked confused. The more questions I asked about the story, the less she responded. I'm frustrated and worried. I have no idea what she really understands.



This teacher probably needs to know more about the child's home culture. Perhaps she could talk with a parent or with a community member (a paraprofessional, if there is one in the school system) who may be able to shed light on Hermana's behavior. She can also try different, more private ways of finding out about Hermana's story comprehension. Retelling the story through drawings may be one nonthreatening and even culturally appropriate way to do so. Some questions that will need to be answered are:

- What is the role of stories in the child's home culture?
- What kinds of stories are told to children or read by them?
- How are children expected to participate in storytelling?
- Do parents or elders typically ask questions about the child's response to a story?
- Is it considered appropriate to offer an opinion or to put oneself in the place of a character?

Answering these questions will perhaps point to some cultural explanations for Hermana's behavior. Of course, the teacher must bear in mind that Hermana is also an individual whose personal experiences, interests, and abilities will influence her orientation to literacy.

Below we attempt to capture some of the dilemmas teachers may face in trying to make assessment appropriate for children from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates a range of concerns and possibilities.

FIGURE 3

ASSESSMENT DILEMMA	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p><i>Students' culture does not encourage competitive responses in a group.</i></p>	<p><i>Allow for small-group or pair interaction with informal teacher observation.</i></p> <p><i>Do not confront student in large group but encourage volunteering answers.</i></p> <p><i>Allow for choral response.</i></p>
<p><i>Students are used to cooperating and helping each other at home. They find the competitive frame of assessment strange, and they don't understand why they can't help each other more. (In some cases, students may come from countries where individual testing is rarely, if ever, done.)</i></p>	<p><i>Allow students to help each other (using their cultural strengths) whenever possible. Their group orientation can facilitate learning greatly.</i></p> <p><i>Explain that for certain assessments students will need to work independently, and make explicit the rules about when and where not to cooperate.</i></p> <p><i>There is no reason that even practice tests for standardized achievement tests can't be done in pairs or small groups.</i></p>
<p><i>Students do not understand purpose and consequences of assessment.</i></p>	<p><i>Explain that assessments can help show what a student has learned and needs to work on.</i></p> <p><i>Let students know that it is important to "do your best."</i></p>

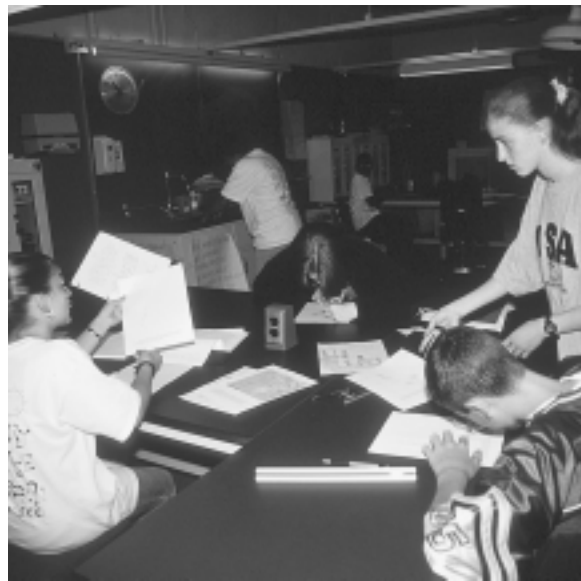
ASSESSMENT DILEMMA	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
<p><i>You want to use performance assessments based on students' research projects more, believing you can see students' progress better in a meaningful context where skills have to be integrated—but extended writing in English is difficult for your English language learners.</i></p>	<p><i>Allow students adequate time for writing. They may need more than native English speakers.</i></p> <p><i>If students are collaborating, let them use their first language (if they share a first language) to plan their project and discuss what they are learning. Consider demonstrations, dramatizations, visual models, and illustrations as alternatives to at least some of the writing.</i></p>
<p><i>On writing assessments, some students intermix text patterns and conventions that they have learned in school and ones that come from their language or dialect. For example, a student may introduce dialogue where it doesn't seem appropriate according to school norms. Or he or she may not use a "conventional" ordering of events.</i></p>	<p><i>Help students become aware of the patterns and conventions they are using so that they can make choices about when to use which ones.</i></p> <p><i>If students meet agreed-upon standards, they should not be graded down on the basis of different text patterns. If a high-stakes assessment requires adherence to school norms of writing, be sure students know that.</i></p>
<p><i>An assessment has been developed for native English speakers; some of your students are still learning English, but all of your students are required to take it.</i></p>	<p><i>Explain to students that the assessment is really for native English speakers and that they should do as well as they can but not feel bad if they don't understand something. Rephrase instructions as needed, so that at least they understand the overall task at hand.</i></p> <p><i>Use results judiciously; recognize that such tests are not valid indices of the overall knowledge, skill, or ability of students who are learning English.</i></p>

The more teachers understand how culture and language affect learning— influencing how students participate in class and what they produce—the more informed they will be about both instruction and assessment. They will understand serious flaws in conventional assessment practices and will find themselves modifying assessments, developing new ones, or even discovering new assessment methods. They will also be more informed critics of the value of assessments for students for whom the assessments were not necessarily designed.

Authentic Assessment and Second Language Learners

In his book *Educative Assessment* (1998), Grant Wiggins states, “the aim of assessment is primarily to educate and improve student performance, not merely to audit it.” Wiggins is an advocate of authentic tasks for students, ones that allow students to conduct real-world, engaging work and draw on higher order cognitive skills. In conjunction with authentic tasks, Wiggins points out the significance of ongoing neutral feedback, which will lead to student self-adjustment (alteration of performance) and improvement. Feedback can be communicated through detailed rubrics, performance checklists, written narratives, and conferences; student work can be organized into ongoing (works-in-progress) and performance portfolios (in which students are asked to select work as part of a critique process for advancement). It is important to understand that feedback is not solely derived from the teacher. Peer feedback, parent feedback, and self-assessment are crucial components along the road to self-adjustment. Students’ products may include essays, research projects, scientific experiments, oral exhibitions, and visual and performing arts pieces, to name a few (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995).

If we revisit some of the key strategies for instruction of second language learners, we notice that they bear a striking similarity to the kinds of authentic work Wiggins proposes. For instance, the TESOL Standards



and the CREDE Standards emphasize the need to provide environments where English language learners can interact in meaningful ways with their peers. In a classroom where students are asked to perform authentic tasks, peer interaction becomes the norm, just as it is the norm to converse and exchange ideas with one's peers outside the classroom. Darling-Hammond et al. (1995) describe collaboration among students in the *Motion* program at International High School in New York. International High School serves students who have been in the U.S. for 4 years or less.

The use of assessment to drive collaborative learning turns out to produce one of the most powerful experiences *Motion* students have. Students work in groups to design experiments and solve problems in mathematics and physics, to interpret literature and write to and with one another about books and ideas, and to conquer physical challenges at Project Adventure. Throughout these activities, they must surmount language barriers to communicate with each other—thus being forced to learn and use English for complex, content-rich tasks—and they must surmount the challenges of different styles, approaches to work, and prior levels of knowledge.

(p. 134)

Ultimately, students in classrooms that provide the opportunity for authentic tasks and assessment are more invested in their work and more likely to self-adjust or alter their performance. At International High School, for example, new students engage in an ongoing process of writing their autobiographies. Through small-group collaboration and feedback, the writers produce works that will eventually be part of their final portfolios. One teacher is quoted as saying that “no student has ever lost his or her autobiography” (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995, p. 166).

Utilizing authentic tasks and assessment requires careful planning and implementation. Wiggins has developed a checklist for teachers to apply to tasks they have designed.

TABLE 1

Assessment Design Self-Assessment Checklist

- **It is clear which desired achievements are being measured.**
- **Criteria and indicators are the right ones for this task and for the achievement being assessed.**
- **Content standards are addressed explicitly in the design; successful task performance requires mastery of the content standard.**
- **Genre(s) or performance/production are important and appropriate for the achievements being assessed.**
- **Standards have been established that go beyond the local norms of the school to credible outside standards or have been established by internal or external oversight.**
- **Students will have ample and appropriate guidelines for understanding their performance obligations.**
- **Task will provide students and teachers with ample feedback for self-assessment and self-adjustment both during and after its completion.**

(Wiggins, 1998)

These criteria can help teachers plan their assessment of English language learners thoughtfully. The first criteria, “It is clear which desired achievements are being measured,” invites us to consider whether our goal is to teach and assess language proficiency or content mastery. If we have designed the task to teach and assess content, then we must not confuse lack of language proficiency with lack of content mastery in our assessment of student work.



ACTIVITY: Assessment Design Self-Assessment Checklist

Analyze the other six criteria from the Assessment Design Self-Assessment Checklist. How can each of these help improve instructional design and assessment for English language learners and students from nondominant cultures whose ways of learning and communicating may differ from those of the dominant culture?

A Note on Grading

When it comes to considering the implications of language and culture, grading presents the teacher with the same dilemmas as assessment. In the case of grading, the teacher needs to carefully determine what standards must be met and which student products and performances she should count in determining a grade. In addition, the teacher needs to decide how to weight the different pieces of assessment (such as how much each will count toward the final grade). In fact, these considerations apply to all students, but language and culture complicate the picture. For instance, a teacher may value classroom participation, but some students avoid full participation in whole-group discussion because of their cultural backgrounds. Should they be given lower grades? Students who are still acquiring English may work more slowly on a test. If they don't finish, should they be graded on the same basis as other students? If so, should such a grade be factored into their final grade in the same way as for other students? If students' essays are scored according to several traits (for example, ideas, conventions, cohesion, voice, etc.), should equal weight be given to traits that rely heavily on high-level grammatical mastery?

ACTIVITY: Grading the Work of English Language Learners

Many teachers find themselves with the question of how to grade the written reports of the language minority student who has insufficient proficiency in English. The student has turned in a paper with very good content, but many grammatical errors. They know the student worked harder on his composition than any of their other students.

Discuss what criteria you would use for grading the student's work.

There are no simple answers to the dilemmas posed above. Teachers will have to make decisions based on policies in their own schools and—as much as possible—on their students’ particular profiles and needs. However, because grades affect students personally (in terms of motivation and self-judgment) and have consequences for students’ school careers (such as retention and placement), they must be taken very seriously. In many cases, a district undertakes assessment reform without simultaneously addressing grading practices, thus jeopardizing the validity, fairness, and equity of its accountability system.

Language Differences, Language Deficits, and Learning Problems

Because individuals have such a deep-seated sense of what language ought to sound like, on the basis of their own language socialization, the hardest task in distinguishing between difference and deficit is coming to accept a greater range of expression as normal. Very few students have actual language disorders, and virtually none are simply making random errors or speaking in slang (or other “nonstandard” language varieties). For example, a suburban school district collaborated with an inner-city school district to racially integrate the students. As soon as African American students arrived, they were being referred for speech therapy. The teachers reported that they made numerous grammatical errors and couldn’t pronounce many words (e.g., saying “muvver” for “mother” and “birfday” for “birthday”). It was only through a series of professional development workshops with the new African-American speech and language therapist and reading specialist that teachers came to understand that these “errors” were simply systematic differences between standard and nonstandard forms of language. Yet, a public perception persists that nonstandard languages are codes filled with errors and spoken by ignorant people.

In working with English language learners, distinguishing between normal developmental differences and actual deficits takes the assistance of professionals who have been trained in language acquisition—whether bilingual teachers or bilingual speech and language therapists. Normal patterns of development will look different depending on a learner’s first language, the age at which English was acquired, the methods by which English was taught, and even the child’s “linguistic personality.” Some children are naturally more talkative and sociable, and they tend to take more risks quickly with a new language (Saville-Troike, 1984). English language learners should be evaluated by a professional at least once a year, and sooner if a teacher observes

that a student is not making academic progress. Of course, understanding culture-based differences in language use will help a teacher put much of a student's linguistic behavior in proper perspective. A taciturn student may have been socialized to be quiet and respectful. Teachers who have had some experience with students from a particular language or cultural group will have a sense of whether a student is progressing normally. (See "Assessing Language Proficiency" for ideas on how teachers can check student progress.) The greatest risk is underestimating a child's capabilities because his or her language sounds different, but there is also a risk that a child who could benefit from special services may have a real deficit overlooked.

Assessment of a student's language proficiency and academic progress in multiple areas requires the use of multiple measures. With regard to language assessment, it is critical to evaluate how the student uses language in different situations and for specific purposes (for example, for social versus academic purposes). As we have said, assessment is itself a cultural phenomenon. In some countries, such as Mexico, very little formal assessment is done. In some cultures within the United States, the ways assessment is conducted in our schools would be considered either rude or inane. For these reasons, we need to identify a range of ways to assess and hope that we can match them appropriately to our students. At the same time, we need to help students become comfortable performing in ways that schools expect. So language-dependent are our assessments that it will always be difficult to determine, with English language learners, whether an assessment is testing a language ability or academic progress.