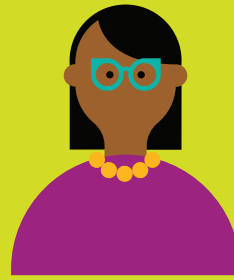


Practical Guidelines



for Working with English Language Learners (ELLs)

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The chances are good that you might recall taking a course in graduate school that addressed working with multicultural populations, but chances are slim that you had a course that specifically addressed the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs). Research conducted by Aldridge, Bernstein, and Davies (2015) indicates that “School psychology programs are not adequately preparing graduate students to serve the growing population of ELLs.” In fact, it was found that approximately 4% of School Psychology Programs offered a course that was specifically devoted to ELLs (Aldrige, Berstein, & Davies, 2015). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that the number of ELL students in the United States rose from 3.8 million (8.1%) in 2000 to 4.8 million (9.5%) in the fall of 2015 (NCES, nd). While the majority may know that the number of ELL students has risen, many are not aware of the states with the greatest growth in numbers.

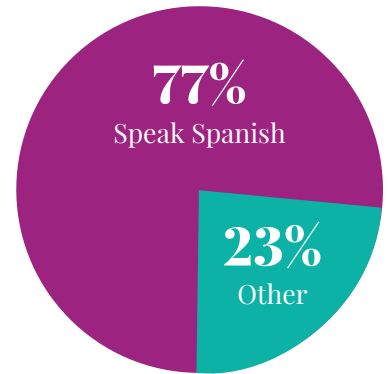
According to the NCES, as of 2015, the states with the fastest growing number of ELL students are Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina. These statistics suggest that if you are employed in a public school setting, regardless of what state you live in, you will most likely face challenging questions asked by staff about best practices when working with ELL students. This article is meant to provide some practical applications that may be used by Early Career School Psychologists, but may also be applied to Psychologists that are employed in other settings such as daycares, hospitals, private practice, or are working with adults.



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According to the NCES, the majority of ELL students enrolled in schools in the US speak Spanish (approximately 77%). The remainder speak other languages including Arabic (2.4%), Chinese (2.1%), Vietnamese (1.7%), Somali (.7%), Hmong (.7%), Russian (.7%), Haitian-Creole (.6%), Tagalog (.6%), and Korean (.6%). Therefore it's clear as a whole, ELLs are a diverse group of individuals that differ in culture and language use from US mainstream populations.



Despite these inherent differences, ELL students are expected to meet the same academic standards as non-ELL students, while simultaneously learning a new language (in this case English). Obviously, this is a challenging feat for individuals who have not mastered the English language and have not developed proficiency.

Below are some facts about ELLs that are pertinent to this discussion:

1. According to the [Migration Policy Institute](#), most ELL students were born in the US and are US citizens. 85% of students in grades Pre-K–5 were born in the US, while 62% of ELL students in grades 6–12 were born in the US.
2. According to [NPR](#), only 63% of ELLs graduate from high school. This is quite discrepant from the national rate of 82%. Of those who graduate, only 1.4% take college entrance exams.
3. ELLs are often underrepresented in gifted education. According to the [NPR](#), only 2% of ELLs are enrolled in Gifted Programs, compared with 7.3% of gifted non-ELL students.
4. [Research suggests](#) that the longer a student remains classified as ELL, the more likely they are to abandon school.
5. Websites such as [Colorin Colorado](#) indicate that approximately 60% of ELLs come from low-income families. This suggests that their parents often have limited levels of educational themselves.
6. According to the [NCES](#), Latinos have the highest dropout rate in the US. As of 2014, Latinos born in the US had lower dropout rates (7.1% for first-generation students and 8.1% for second-generation and higher) than Latinos born outside of the US (21%). Individuals of Guatemalan (28.7%), Honduran (19.5%), and Salvadoran (14.9%) descent had higher dropout rates than the total dropout rates for all Latinos (10.7%).
7. Language minority learners (often referred to as ELLs) are one of the fastest growing groups in US schools. Research conducted by Samson & Lesaux (2008) found that language minority learners are underrepresented in special education in kindergarten and 1st grade. However, language minority learners appear to be overrepresented in special education in grades 3 and higher.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) conducted a member survey that indicated that as of 2015, 87% of the NASP members were Caucasian, 5% were African American, 2.8% were of Asian descent, and 6% were Latino. The survey also indicated that only 7% of the individuals who participated were proficient in Spanish, 1.3% were proficient in Sign Language, and 5.3% were proficient in 27 other languages. This means that although 1 in about every

10 students in the United States is classified as an ELL student, we certainly do not have enough School Psychologists who speak Spanish or other languages to address these students' diverse needs. As a result, a way to empower School Psychologists, whether bilingual or not, is to enhance their knowledge in terms of best practices when it comes to the assessment of ELLs.

A School Psychologist/Psychologist who works with ELL students, whether bilingual or not, would be best equipped to serve ELL students by understanding some of the following concepts in terms of best practice in assessment:

- 1. Standardization** – Examiners need to adhere to standardized administration of a measure in order to make comparisons between the examinee and the norm group. If an examiner deviates from the standardization of a measure, then the validity of those results can be questioned. When an examiner decides to administer a particular item in another language, accept responses in other languages (unless that measure has been standardized in that manner like the WISC-V Spanish for example), or extend time limits beyond those set forth by the measure, they are not adhering to the standardization of a measure. These are typically referred to as test adaptations (See Flanagan, Ortiz, and Alfonso – 2013). In addition, when standardization is broken, it is recommended that you document this in your report and provide an explanation.
- 2. Understanding the use of norms.** When you are working with a specific individual (whether adult or child), determine whether that particular individual is represented in the norm group for that measure. When this is not the case, it is the examiner's professional duty to make a note of this in their report. For example, if you are working with a student who was born in Mexico and has only resided in the US for approximately three years, it is reasonable to assume that this particular individual may have had educational, cultural, and linguistic experiences than individuals included in the norm group. It may therefore be unreasonable to assume that the norms utilized truly capture this individual's experiences or abilities. When these instances occur, the examiner may wish to utilize wording that depicts these inherent differences such as " ...due to cultural and linguistic differences that cannot be truly captured by any assessment tool, it is this examiner's clinical opinion that the following results be interpreted with caution as they may not be reflective of Maria's true overall level of functioning and potential at this time."

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3. Gather information about a person or student's language proficiency in English before assuming that they are indeed fluent. Although an examiner may only be fluent in English, they are still able to assess an examinee's ability to communicate effectively in that language. There are many measures available to help examiners determine language proficiency in English. This step is important because if you assume that a person is fluent in English and they are not, you may be measuring a characteristic that could be irrelevant to the construct being measured, which may be different from what you intend to measure. For example, rather than measuring Crystallized Knowledge or G_c , you may be measuring a person's proficiency in English. According to American Educational Research Association (AERA), "A test that is fair does not unduly advantage or disadvantage certain examinees because of individual characteristics that are irrelevant to the construct being measured." (AERA, 2014)



4. Conduct a thorough social developmental history that includes how long that individual has resided in the US, where they are originally from, medical and early developmental history, the education level attained in their native country, what kinds of (if any) difficulties they may have experienced in their native country, history of retention/s, family history of disabilities (e.g., learning problems, language problems, autism), the primary language spoken by the family, and their educational experiences while residing in the US.

5. It is important that examiners list not only challenges experienced by ELL students, but also assets and strengths that they may possess. Some of these individuals may have strong literacy skills in their native language which would be highly beneficial, because typically the transfer of information from one language to another is more easily facilitated when you have a stronger knowledge base to work with. Some individuals may have strong academic skills and content knowledge in their native language. For this reason, it may be necessary to consult with personnel who are fluent in the student's native language, as well as the individual's family. Examiners may want to consider gathering basic academic data such as an informal curriculum-based assessment in the child's native language with the assistance of school personnel who are fluent in the child's native language.

6. Cultivate and promote the use of the family's native language at home. Research suggests that building skills in a student's native language may actually facilitate their acquisition of the English language. We should encourage parents to teach the language that they know best so that they are also able to share content. In addition, fostering communication between family members in the native language promotes a sense of belonging, cultural worthiness, and openness.

7. *Nonverbal measures are often utilized by psychologists who work with ELLs.* Although nonverbal intellectual measures may be administered via pantomime, the person being tested may not be represented in the norm sample for that measure, and there may be cultural factors that are different and may impact results. In addition, the use of nonverbal cues or gestures are not universal. For example, a thumbs-up gesture may have a negative or positive connotation depending on where you are from. For this reason, it is recommended that the examiner thoroughly review nonverbal gestures with the examinee before commencing testing. As noted by Flanagan et al (2013), most nonverbal measures may reduce the language loading, but certainly do not eliminate it completely as they may typically have directions that are provided verbally and have tasks that are mediated verbally. Although nonverbal intellectual measures are most often used to rule out intellectual deficiencies or delays, they do not tap into areas such as crystallized knowledge, auditory processing, vocabulary, or auditory working memory, which are important areas to assess when a reading disability is suspected. (Flanagan, et al., 2013)



8. *Collaborate with others when concerns arise.* It may be beneficial to consult with colleagues who are familiar with the student's culture and can provide some insight regarding best assessment practices. In addition, it may be helpful to work with personnel who speak the student's native language and can help provide some insight into the child's language dominance and/or proficiency. In many cases, best practice may dictate that we work with interpreters. For these difficult cases, it would be beneficial to familiarize ourselves with practical guidelines for working with interpreters. Professional and ethical guidelines for interpreters can be found in a variety of places including the Differential Ability Scales® II — Early Years Spanish Supplement.

In summary, there is no perfect recipe that practitioners can follow when working with ELL students. However, it helps to understand the reason for the referral (or assessment), what areas you intend to measure, how to go about gathering that data in the best way possible, and to assess in an effort to better understand a child for intervention purposes. In my personal experience as a Bilingual School Psychologist, it helps to develop a framework for assessment that can assist you and enhance the process.

For more articles on assessment, please visit [PearsonAssessments.com/EarlyCareer](https://www.pearsonassessments.com/EarlyCareer).

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