



English as a Second Language Council

of The Alberta Teachers' Association

Accent

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President's Message

by Sarah Clark



Sarah Clark

Welcome to the spring issue of *Accent*. We hope the electronic version of our publication reaches members in a timely and environmentally conscious fashion. You can also find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ATAESLC and on Twitter at @ESLCATA.

As incoming president of the English as a Second Language Council (ESLC), I can't express how humbled I am to serve our

members and students. I truly believe we have a shared responsibility for English language learners, and I am eager to advocate. As a council we must ensure that students receive the support they need to become active and contributing members of society.



Effective IMMEDIATELY, your annual no-cost specialist council membership will no longer expire in August. Instead, it will continue year after year until you change it.

To register or change your council membership, log in at www.teachers.ab.ca with your TNET username and password.

Specialist councils are your source for conferences, networking, publications, resources, workshops, online communities and professional development.

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In an effort to connect with members and to keep members informed, ESLC holds an annual conference. This year the ESLC conference will be held in Edmonton at the DoubleTree by Hilton on November 14–15, 2014. For more information and to register, please check out our website at www.eslcata.com. Over the next few years, as a part of our strategic planning, executive council members will look at alternative ways to bring PD to all members.

We are always looking for people to get involved with our executive. If you are interested in serving on the executive, please e-mail Diane Pham, our vice-president, at ataeslcvicepresident@gmail.com for an application form. We are still in need of a member at large for Southern Alberta and a 2016 conference director. Elections are held during the annual

conference at the annual general meeting, which is open to all members. Please contact us for more information.

Last, we offer a \$300 teacher bursary to members who are taking postsecondary courses in ESL. If you are planning on taking any ESL-related postsecondary courses, keep in mind that the next ESLC bursary deadline is September 30, 2014. More information about this bursary is available on our website at <http://tinyurl.com/olomdny>.

Additional information regarding role descriptions for executive members and teacher bursaries can also be found at the end of this newsletter.

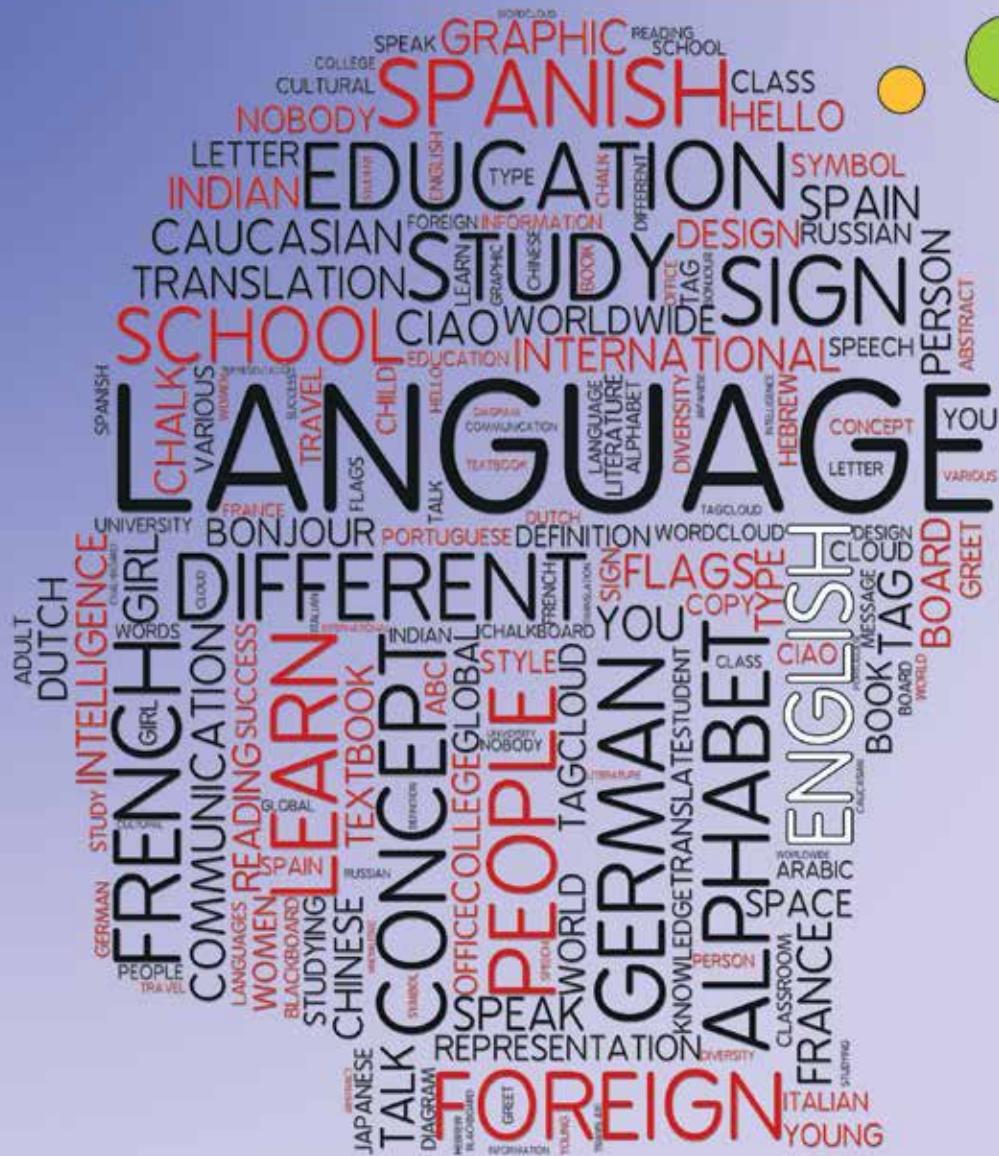
As always, your comments, suggestions and ideas are welcome. Have a wonderful summer.

Sarah Clark



Living in Language:

Learn it Today,
Teach it Tomorrow



English as a Second Language Council 2014 Conference

November 14-15, 2014

DoubleTree by Hilton West Edmonton

Visit www.eslcata.com to register



 ATAESLC



ESLCATA

Editor's Corner

by Annie Fung



Annie Fung

I begin this issue with a special tribute to Karen Virag, ATA's former supervising editor, who passed away in January. Although I only met Karen once at our "headquarters," we communicated regularly in the past few years whenever she and her team assisted the ESLC and me in the publication of *Accent*. As many friends and colleagues would agree, Karen was a talented writer, a wonderful friend and much more. She was always quick to suggest articles published in other councils' newsletters that might be of interest to *Accent* readers. More important, at a time when I was homesick (since we relocated to Calgary from Edmonton), she never failed to ask how we were settling in and to offer us her good cheer and encouragement. Karen touched many of our lives in meaningful ways, and we shall miss her very much. On behalf of the ESLC, I would also like to thank our ATA editors for their great efforts because without their advice, patience and reassurance, smooth publications of *Accent* would be nearly impossible.

Besides updating you on what your ESLC executive has been doing behind the scenes and providing you with important information that is specific to your district, you will see that this issue is jam-packed with emerging issues in ELL teaching and learning. For example, there has been lots of buzz surrounding Alberta Education's e-assessments that will be rolling out in schools near you. As a fan of technology, I find it rather fascinating that

computers can grade essays much faster than you and I (they said, literally, in seconds!). But of course, there are many valid concerns surrounding this new method of assessing student work too. And I cannot help but think how this may play out for assessing the writing of ESL students—what are the pros and cons? While I hope that we don't jump to conclusions either way, let's take advantage of the summer to glance at some of the articles here and start a conversation.

Speaking of conversations, how many of us have talked with colleagues, administrators or parents regarding ESL students' needs that may not be of a linguistic nature? How many of us have advocated for special needs testing for certain ESL students because we worry that we don't know the whole picture and have been told that we must wait a few years until students have more time to develop linguistically? While there are cases where students simply needed to play catch-up, certain ESL students may actually have benefited from special needs testing and support sooner rather than later. If you have at least one conversation about these topics, I strongly encourage you to read Nancy Musica's articles on how we may assist and assess linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) students who may be at risk. There are questions and useful forms that you can use in the appendix. For those who would like some more summer reading, she has also included a literature review on this topic.

As the school year draws to a close, I'd like to salute you for all that you do for ESL students and their families. In many ways, your relationships with these students and families are more intimate because other than being a teacher, you are likely the first friend they have made in Canada. I have no doubt that with larger class sizes and fewer resources, you have still given your best this year, and your students think so too! May report cards be a breeze for you this month and your summer be a fun, safe and restful one! And don't forget, now that *Accent* is downloadable in PDF, you can take your summer reading with you! See you in the fall.

Tribute to Karen Virag

by Jonathan Tegtmeyer

Reprinted from the ATA News, January 28, 2014.



I am not nearly as good a writer as I appear to be. We at the Alberta Teachers' Association are blessed to be surrounded by an outstanding team of editors.

Sadly, a key member of that team, Karen Virag—our supervising editor of publications and good friend—died on

January 11, 2014, following a brief illness.

Besides being a superb editor, Karen was a fabulous writer and her skill with words and attention to detail influenced publications produced by the Association for the past 16 years.

Karen was sharp, in terms of intelligence, style and wit. She had the most incredible one-liners, often delivered at breakneck speed while maintaining her characteristic eloquence. And even when those lines were delivered at your expense, you knew they came from a place of love and respect, because Karen was a genuinely kind and generous person.

Born in 1957 and raised in southwestern Ontario's "tobacco country," Karen attended the University of Toronto, where she obtained a general studies BA (English, Latin, French) in 1981. She went on to earn an MA in comparative literature from the University of Alberta in 1996.

Karen travelled widely, was a lover of languages and fluent in many. She respected the power of the written word and was a published author across different genres.

She joined ATA staff in 1996, and was a frequent contributor to the *ATA News* and the *ATA Magazine*. As the administrative staff member with the Association's Diversity, Equity and Human Rights

Committee, Virag wrote and published *Just in Time*, the committee's award-winning newsletter. She worked closely with many teacher leaders from across the province in her role editing specialist council journals and publications. She was also the ATA's resident expert on copyright matters.

Away from Barnett House, Karen was half of CBC Radio's Grammar Gals, contributed to CBC Radio's *Ideas* program ("Silver and Exact," March 6, 2012), and was a book reviewer for the *Edmonton Journal* and a writer for the *Tomato*. She taught courses in grammar and edited fiction and nonfiction works on a freelance basis.

As an ardent supporter of the arts, Karen sat as a board member on Edmonton's Arts on the Avenue board, the Editors' Association of Canada, where she served as director of publications, and the Cultural Human Resources Council of Canada.

Out of respect for Karen's contribution to the teachers of Alberta, Provincial Executive Council observed a minute of silence at its January 16 meeting. The flag at Barnett House was flown at half-mast the day of Karen's funeral, January 24.

Karen was widely respected and will be missed terribly.

Given her talent for writing, I thought it best to leave you with Karen's own words. Here is an excerpt that shows her regard for teachers, from an article she wrote for the *ATA News* on plans by the Ontario government to institute a teacher-testing program.

As we all know, good teachers bring many unquantifiable skills and talents to work every day, and some educators are pressed to wonder how the Ontario government plans to measure a teacher's ability to empathize, care, create a safe and caring classroom, communicate with students and parents, integrate special needs kids into the classroom, collaborate, create or inspire. Teaching is not for everyone. But no one—even editorial writers in newspapers known to be hostile to teachers—denies that the vast majority of teachers are dedicated, talented and caring. Holding the threat of expensive, useless tests over their heads demeans the profession. Perhaps the Ontario government would be better advised to pay more attention to testing the water supply and leave teacher development to the teachers.

—Karen Virag

Retreat in Canmore

by Sarah Clark

The ESLC executive members nestled themselves in the Rocky Mountains for the strategic planning session. The weather was sunny outside, and the conversation was lively inside. ATA staff

advisor Monique Gravel led us through PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) to align such things as our purpose, understanding of a situation and its possibilities, actions for change, team development and learning. Thank you, Monique, for facilitating this process and paraphrasing our thoughts. Also thank you, Bebe Vocong, our past president, for being our graphic facilitator and placing our thoughts into a graphic format to allow us to deepen our understandings and focus our ideas.



Bebe, our graphic facilitator extraordinaire



Monique, our facilitator extraordinaire



The PATH Process



Working in breakout groups

We began as one large group and looked at the council from a utopic perspective. We kept the end in mind as we looked at the steps we need to take to get to our utopia. Our group broke into smaller groups around four dimensions: facilitating career-long professional development, building a community of practice, enhancing professional practice and expertise, and advocating on professional issues.

We now have a strategic plan that we know will benefit our members in all the above areas. The strategic plan will be published in the fall issue of *Accent*.



Team building

E-Assessments and Machine Scoring of Student Essays

by Philip McRae

Background

As announced this past spring, Alberta Education is replacing the provincial achievement tests (PATs) with digital student learning assessments (SLAs). These new digital assessments are to be administered at the beginning of each school year in Grades 3, 6 and 9. PATs will be phased out over the next three years as the new digital SLAs are phased in by 2016/17. Grade 3 PATs will be phased out first, with the new digital SLAs being administered to incoming Grade 3 students as early as September 2014. A presentation is publicly available from Alberta Education staff on elements of this move to digital assessments (http://prezi.com/dgr4tn_gn9g7/jtc-nov-2013/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy or <http://tinyurl.com/ka53b8j>).

Current Developments

The stated intent for the digital SLAs to date is to support teacher assessments in literacy and numeracy benchmarks through the digital platform offered by the ministry. The proposed SLAs in Grade 3 will include both short-response (multiple-choice, matching) digital items that are machine scored and performance assessments that will be marked by the teacher.

However, we must be aware that globally the movement toward e-assessments is driven by cost-cutting considerations, expediency of data transfer and very ambiguous visions of an efficient and effective 21st-century learning system.

Alberta Education is also piloting the machine scoring of student essays. Although the details of this

pilot have not been articulated, it was confirmed at a Jurisdiction Technology Contact (JTC) event that an exploratory pilot will be conducted using student data with a company called LightSide Labs (www.lightsidelabs.com), based in Pittsburgh, USA. LightSide Labs is self-described as “invited by the Hewlett Foundation and Kaggle.com to prove the viability of educational writing assessment. Alongside education giants such as Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and ETS, LightSide matched human reliability, faster and at a fraction of the cost.”

Considerations

Several terms related to e-assessments include the following: *computer-based testing*, *computerized-adaptive testing*, *computer-based assessments* and *digital assessments*. However, the term *e-assessment* is generically used to describe computer technologies (from word processors to on-screen testing programs) that are used to assess student work. The current focus is on objectively scored digital assessment items, but examples are emerging for automated essay scoring of student-produced writing tasks.

Computer-based testing has three essential components:

1. Test item development—Hundreds or thousands of digital items can be generated in seconds within a single computer program.
2. Test administration—Tests are administered online, thus eliminating or reducing the costs associated with exam delivery and security. However, the final access costs of the e-assessments are borne by the end users (be that personal device, institution bandwidth or school computers).
3. Test scoring, analytics and reporting—Test reporting is to be fully automated and instantly reported. In terms of essays, it is claimed that 16,000 essays can be graded every 20–40 seconds. The instant reporting dimension of results is often compared to a six-week window for current tests to be returned to students. Machine scoring is currently very limited in terms of its ability to handle the semantics of complex written responses.

The e-assessment movement suggests paper-based testing is dead. It is claimed that computer-based testing will either eliminate or automate two-thirds of the testing activities that, currently, human beings (teachers) do manually.

The field of interest in e-assessments are growing rapidly, as evidenced by a \$1.4 million dollar Tier 1 Canada Research Chair (CRC) award in educational measurement to Professor Mark Gierl, of the University of Alberta. Gierl will specifically be researching approaches to producing a large number of test items university educators will require for the transition to computerized educational testing, also known as automatic-item generation.

Gierl (2012), as an international leader in the field, argues that the following four principles should account for the further adoption of e-assessments:

Principle #1: We will shift from infrequent summative assessments (for example, 2 midterms + final) to more frequent formative assessment (for example, 8–10 exams or more per term).

Principle #2: Testing on demand is required where students can write exams at any time and at any location.

Principle #3: Assessments will be scored immediately and students will receive both instant and detailed feedback on their overall performance as well as their problem-solving strengths and weaknesses.

Principle #4: You will spend less time and less effort implementing these principles in your large classes compared to the amount of time you currently spend on assessment-related activities—in fact, much less.

Possible Implications

While the ministry asserts that the rollout of the SLAs in Grades 3, 6 and 9 will include classroom-based, teacher-driven assessments, there are increasing indications that the focus of government is

committing resources to digital-testing platforms. This is further evident in the shift of the delivery of diploma examinations to a digital platform.

Although there are several problems with e-assessments being reductionist to only those things that can be put into a digital multiple-choice format, there are obvious additional challenges when writing tasks are coupled with machine scoring. For example, where does the student's writing in the margins or brainstorming work get accounted for in the e-assessment? Is process lost, while only final product is assessed? E-assessment, or the move toward computer-based testing in general, is fundamentally about reducing the costs associated with human beings involved in the testing process to increase efficiencies within the system. This is done by eliminating human beings from (or automating) two-thirds of the testing process itself (item generation, administration and scoring/analyzing/reporting).

Further considerations of the shift to e-assessments can be found in the following articles:

- “Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics, or What’s Really Up With Automated Essay Scoring?” by Todd Farley
www.huffingtonpost.com/todd-farley/lies-damn-lies-and-statis_b_1574711.html
- “Computer Grading Will Destroy Our Schools,” by Benjamin Winterhalter
www.salon.com/2013/09/30/computer_grading_will_destroy_our_schools

Reference

Gierl, M. 2012. “How You Can Learn to Love Large-Scale Assessment: Let Me Count the Ways.” Paper presented at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) Teaching Big Symposium, University of Alberta, Edmonton, August, 2012.

This article was reprinted from Bits and Bytes, volume 6, number 2, February 2014.

E-Assessment: Lifeline or Mirage?

by Gerald Logan

With the recent legislated settlement came a lot of talk of workload and work-life balance. Over the years we have changed from a summative assessment model to a much more formative assessment model. We acknowledge that students learn not from the mark on the paper but the thoughtful comments that the teacher places on the assignment. Teachers often challenge the student with comments on the assignments to think deeper and present alternative points of view. This is well established, and writers have been prolific with research. The Alberta Assessment Consortium is a good place to look for leadership in this area.

Good long-answer marking is not a fast process; it is time-consuming and requires much thought to do a good job. This is an opportunity for the teacher to challenge the students' thoughts and force them to think about the assumptions they have made and the rationalization they have used. This takes a lot of the teacher's time and energy. The balance between formative and summative assessment is hard to establish. Teachers offer formative assessment whenever they help students with their writing, not just when they formally review drafts of student writing. Summative assessment is much clearer, and it is a small part of the daily work schedule of classrooms. The percentage of classroom time dedicated to formative assessment is going to vary from teacher to teacher and change with the age of the students. The amount of time is going to be dependent on the grade level of the course and the academic or nonacademic stream.

E-assessment has not been questioned in the area of multiple-choice exams; most schools that use this form of assessment have the equipment on-site today. We do continue to argue about the optimum balance between multiple-choice and long-answer questions in assessment. But why not use the computer to mark the long-answer assessments, too? Artificial

intelligence has come a long way, and we could reduce the workload of teachers if we just fed the written papers into a computer and had the computer issue the marks. Let's face it. Most computer programs can give us a reading level, why not a writing level?

Several companies offer this service now; one of particular interest is LightSide Labs (<http://lightsidelabs.com>). When I mark papers, I look for several components, accurate facts, writing conventions, creative use of examples and convincing arguments. The LightSide Labs website is interesting. It explains that the software is fed student work that has been marked by teachers. It then looks for patterns that are characteristic of assignments that teachers gave good marks as well as poor marks. The software assigns marks by "rewarding writing that looks like the strongest," so marks will be awarded by the system not for being good but sharing characteristics with good writing. Interesting.

The software needs 500 examples to be effective at recognizing these good characteristics of writing, so you have to use the predefined writing prompts. The software ignores some of the mainstays of formative and summative teacher marking; it does not check grammar or the accuracy of the information used in the writing. The system is not considered suitable for long assignments. LightSide does not recommend this as a platform for marking creative writing because it is too subjective and not a good match.

The research has shown that e-assessments can produce data sets from assignments; the mean is often close to the mean of teacher markers. The software does not always agree with teacher markers; understand that teachers often do not agree either. They have a reliability rating of 85 per cent, while the software has a reliability rating of about 65 per cent.

With this all being considered, why is Alberta Education following the lead of many states and doing a pilot with computerized written assignment marking? It might be to stay on top of the use of technology in classrooms. It might be to help reduce the cost of marking written exams, which is about 33 per cent of the cost of a testing system much like the PATs and SLAs. With the recent reduction in the compensation given to teachers marking diploma

exams, Alberta Education has created a shortage of markers. One has to wonder which came first: the idea of e-assessment with LightSide Labs or the drive to reduce the cost of exam marking?

In my humble opinion, educators in Alberta should sit on the sidelines in the lucrative e-assessment game until the software can at least check for grammar and accuracy of facts. If we are going to continue high-stakes testing, we should at

least find the money to make sure the tests are marked well. The state of the art is still classroom teachers. If Alberta educators don't think we should spend the money to do a good job of this, the government should get out of the field of assigning marks to students and let the professionals do it.

This article was reprinted from Bits and Bytes, volume 6, number 2, February 2014.

Action Research Project: Using Collaborative Conversation to Assess At-Risk Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students

by Nancy Musica

Introduction

In my work as a consultant, I have seen ESL students without learning disabilities coded as special needs, and I have seen a hesitation in assessing and coding ESL students who may truly have learning disabilities. In the past, concerned teachers have looked to formal testing when they sensed diverse learning needs and when students were struggling. This led to formal assessment of many ESL students who had not had enough time or exposure to ESL instructional strategies to develop their English skills. The jump to formalized testing may have been premature. As a result, and alternatively, the message to not test ESL students began to circulate in the district. Many specialists refuse to test students unless they have been exposed to English instruction in Canada for two years (and sometimes they don't count kindergarten). Waiting too long to assess students when they have true learning disabilities and English learning needs can lead to lost opportunities and inappropriate programming when time is of the essence. Making appropriate decisions is difficult when culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are struggling and there is much to consider. This action research

project investigates the use of collaborative conversations between an ESL consultant and classroom teachers to consider research-based considerations when determining next steps for CLD students who are struggling with learning.

Problem Formulation

When teachers are concerned about CLD students and wonder if their learning needs go beyond that of a typical language learner, there are many factors to consider. Typically, referrals are made to inclusive learning (IL) specialists with little information provided regarding the specific concerns and the language abilities of the students. At the least, a prereferral conversation has been requested from IL supervisors before formal referrals are forwarded. A learning profile template has been developed and provided to schools in order for teachers to provide information to specialists regarding background information and to support the need for formal assessment. Unfortunately, teachers may not understand why this is deemed necessary and may not appreciate the expectation to fill out pages of information on a student before receiving support from specialists in the district. They also may not fully understand the process of formalized assessment and that many of the approaches for identifying students with learning needs may not be culturally appropriate or culturally sensitive for ESL students. Teachers do look to specialists for support and hope to find answers.

Many school districts struggle with separating difference from disability among CLD students, and researchers have put forward numerous recommendations, checklists and processes for culturally sensitive assessment. At an ESL conference session on this topic, a Calgary Public Schools psychologist said, "Don't test them!" but then admitted some CLD students would have special needs and that the assessment process must be done with careful consideration and flexibility. A school district in Anchorage, Alaska, shares its multipage protocol for identifying special needs students with CLD backgrounds on the Net. Catherine Collier has a 300-plus page manual entitled *Seven Steps to Separating Difference from Disability* (2010) and has worked in school districts

across North America training educators in culturally sensitive assessment. Though this work has been done, many teachers are not aware of it. Knowing how busy teachers are and how limited their time for professional learning can be, it was decided that a short reference document would need to be developed from the research summarizing the most pertinent considerations for teachers. It was hoped this would be an efficient way to disseminate research-based information on culturally sensitive assessment.

In this project, two main goals were planned. The first goal was to share with teachers research-based information on culturally sensitive assessment and to provide information on what is needed in order to determine when CLD students could have learning needs that go beyond that of a typical English language learner. The other goal was to help teachers determine next steps and whether formal assessment would be appropriate for identified at-risk CLD students. It was decided that both goals could be accomplished through a prereferral, collaborative conversation. It was hoped that through this collaborative conversation, data would be used to consider next steps for specific students. In addition, it was hoped that teachers would find this collaborative approach useful, informative and supportive.

Description and Data Collection

In this project, eight prereferral, collaborative conversations were planned and carried out. These were initiated by a student referral for ESL consultation to inclusive learning. Teachers from several schools who had submitted referrals for at-risk students to inclusive learning were asked to participate, and all of them agreed. Seven elementary students and one junior high student were discussed. Prior to the conversation, the ESL consultant met with the at-risk students and carried out a classroom observation when possible and a current English language proficiency assessment in order to meet the student and provide additional current data for consideration. The conversations took from 30 to 45 minutes, and teachers were asked to fill out a 10-item

feedback form to provide information related to the process and whether the process was effective.

Each collaborative conversation began with an explanation of the project and how determining learning disabilities among at-risk CLD students is challenging but critical. A four-page informational reference document entitled *My ELL Is Struggling with Learning! A Prereferral Conversation* (Appendix A) was given to the teacher, and sections were highlighted briefly by the ESL consultant to set up the prereferral conversation. Then the teachers were asked to share their initial concern, observations and relevant data about the students they had identified. Cultural and other background and family information were also discussed. Following that, the ESL consultant shared results of the English language proficiency assessment and proficiency information and other observations. After this part of the discussion, the next steps were then decided collaboratively. The feedback form (Appendix B) was then shared with the teachers, and, in most cases, they returned the form several days later.

Data Analysis

Generally, the conversations went well, and the teachers seemed interested in the reference document. They were eager to know how their student had done during the ESL proficiency assessment and were willing to share their observations and concerns regarding each student's learning. In all cases, mutually agreed upon next steps were planned, and these recommendations were included in the student's ESL report. As part of the process, the consultant would also inform the administrator of these planned next steps to ensure agreement. In some cases, the consultant would approach inclusive learning specialists for consultation or support. In most cases, the teachers were not sure how to make referrals for further support and sometimes did not know what kinds of support were available. Often student referrals are carried out by administration staff or special needs coordinators.

Student Information

In each case, the student's language, cultural background and length of education in Canada were

collected on the feedback form. The teacher's referring concern was also recorded. The length of education in Canada varied from six months to five years, but, interestingly, four of eight students had been in Canada for two and a half years. One student was Arabic but had spoken English his whole life. He was attending an Arabic bilingual school, so accessing information about his language skills was important. Both his English and Arabic teacher participated in the collaborative conversation, but his Arabic teacher did not complete a feedback form.

More Information Needed

An important part of culturally sensitive assessment requires collecting information on the student. Of the eight teachers, only two had checked Pinpoint for background information and previous assessments before meeting. On the feedback form, teachers mentioned that through the collaborative discussion, they discovered a few areas where they needed more information. These included first language ability, and when English was introduced, whether private testing had been already done, the need for a family interview, and, in the case of the junior high student, the need to meet with all of his other teachers to share observations. One teacher commented, "Certainly our conversation generated good questions."

Issues or Possibilities Not Previously Considered

Through collaboration, it was hoped that new ideas might emerge. Five teachers responded that the conversation and/or the reference information brought up issues or possibilities they had not previously considered, while two teachers responded that it had not. The other teacher felt the conversation confirmed that "there may be more (than ESL-related issues) going on" for her student. Here are some examples of issues that emerged through the collaborative conversation:

- The possibility that the observed frequent eye blinking could be Tourette's
- The observation that students can perform so differently in different classes and the need to include all teachers who work with the student in discussions and decision making

- How psychologists work with students and the steps they take including consultation and formalized assessment
- The need to communicate with parents that issues may be more than those related to being ESL
- The importance of family information and the family interview that is carried out by district intercultural consultants

Would Formal Assessment Be Considered Next?

In the past, and still today, when teachers were concerned about ESL, they often requested formal assessments for students who were struggling academically. This was done mainly because it led to labelling students as special needs and receiving allocations to support them in the mainstream class or in special education settings. In the past several years, a shift in thinking with regards to special needs students has been taking place. Formalized assessment is no longer considered an automatic first step for struggling students.

On the feedback form, teachers were asked if the collaborative conversation and information helped determine if formal assessment was necessary. Responses varied. Two teachers thought formal testing would benefit the student but decided more time was needed. Another teacher also thought formal assessment was needed but only after more information was collected. Two teachers decided a consultation with a reading specialist would be preferable over a formal assessment, one stating that a formal assessment would likely not be approved. Another teacher wanted to wait until more information on first language ability was collected. One teacher commented, "Yes, it is helpful to know if and when formal assessments were needed." Another teacher decided formal assessment was needed for an attentional difficulty and cited the discussion on Response to Intervention (Tier 1, 2 and 3) as helpful in determining when to access formal assessment.

Next Steps

In all cases, teachers were able to list next steps on the feedback form. Interestingly, these next steps did not always require a specialist:

- Observation and consultation for behaviour/attention from a school psychologist

- Family interview
- First language information and assessment
- Parent meeting to discuss school pressure and test anxiety
- Regular counselling check-ins by a staff member to monitor student anxiety
- Mentoring program
- Student social worker weekly check-ins
- Use of headphones
- Consultation with school psychologist
- Consultation with the reading specialist
- One-on-one work in the classroom leading to less support
- ESL consultant to contact inclusive learning speech language pathologist and occupational therapist
- Strengthen the strengths—encourage and explore further opportunities to study art and sports, because these were areas of student interest and strength

Information to Share with a Specialist

The feedback form included a question asking teachers if they had enough information to share with a specialist. One teacher felt she had information but didn't know what a specialist might ask. One teacher felt more information was needed, including information from other teachers who work with the student. She also wanted more information on the student's response to intervention in the ESL class. One teacher noted that she still needed more family background information but felt confident in her knowledge about the student in all other areas. One teacher felt she was still getting to know the student as he had transferred into her class only a month before. Another teacher felt she could share information from the classroom perspective.

Collaborative Conversation Useful in Determining Further Actions to Benefit Student Learning

All respondents found the collaborative conversation useful in determining further actions. Teachers' comments included:

- It's useful to have an outside person look at the student and provide additional strategies and actions.

- In a group of two or three people, yes. Many more, and ideas and information get confusing.
- Certain information shared invited collaboration of ideas on meeting the student's needs.
- If my student has reading difficulties, this will affect my teaching approach.
- (The conversation is) "confirming what administration and teaching staff have already talked about."
- I'm still a new teacher and not familiar with all supports offered.

Ideas to Improve the Process

Teachers were asked if they had ideas to improve the process. Six teachers responded no. One teacher stated, "We know collaboration is important. We need more collaboration time built into school time!" The other suggestion was, "If the report is gone over thoroughly and explained, then you would know what it means for the child." Both these comments are important because they support teachers in ensuring that students' needs are met.

Further Reference or Training

The final item on the feedback form asked teachers if they were interested in learning about related topics. It was explained that this could be offered through a reference sheet similar to the one provided during the collaborative conversation or through workshops or training in the district or at the school. Teachers could check off as many areas as needed. The checked-off areas and the number of respondents who chose them are below:

- Language acquisition (3)
- ESL strategies and accommodations (6)
- ESL assessment practices (5)
- Culturally responsive teaching (2)
- Strength-based instruction and RTI (2)
- Special needs and diverse students (2)

Implications

Response to Intervention

The most important part about these collaborative conversations was discussing how students responded to classroom instruction and whether further interventions had been tried.

Although this approach could be culturally biased, it may be more meaningful than standardized IQ test results. Dynamic assessment and response to intervention provide solid information about how students respond to learning. Research supports that “failure to respond” to remediation may indicate that a more specialized tier of intervention and formal assessment are needed (Collier 2007a). This method leads to data-driven decisions and is cost-effective. Several teachers had not heard of response to intervention or the pyramid of intervention. Research supports this as one of the most powerful intervention approaches, and teacher training in this area is critical (Collier 2007a). Interestingly, only two teachers expressed interest in more information on this topic.

Next Steps

Several teacher participants were new teachers and did not know about all the resources available to them in the district. Although an experienced teacher (with a master’s degree in ESL) had put several interventions in place for her at-risk student, other teachers asked, “How do I do a speech referral?” or “What can a psychologist tell me?” Knowledge of special needs students is more of a requirement now with the move to inclusive education. As frontline workers, teachers must know how to access help and information for struggling students. They must also let parents know what resources can be accessed through the district. Part of this is learned through experience. Inclusive learning specialist teams have been created in the district to send messages to school staff about available resources. Supportive resources are also available online from Alberta Education, such as the Inclusive Learning Library, which includes teacher strategies for a wide variety of special needs and medical conditions.

Asking the Right Questions

Almost all of the teachers (6/8) had not checked Pinpoint records to see if their students had been assessed for English language proficiency, if a family interview was on file or if assessments had been completed. (This was checked informally during the

collaborative conversation.) Most specialists and administrators would expect a teacher to do this prior to making a referral for a CLD student. Because we might conclude that it is not currently being done by every teacher, ways to clearly communicate this message could be explored. It could be explicitly stated in an information sheet to teachers or communicated by administrators. It could also be included as part of the prereferral process with the ESL consultant. Pinpoint is a fairly new process to collect student data, and some teachers may not feel well versed in accessing information in this way.

Future Directions

This kind of collaborative work has great potential in our district. It is hoped that through this process, teachers will become more comfortable working with consultants and specialists and that this will, in turn, lead to actions that will benefit students. As a former school counsellor and special needs coordinator, I am well aware of how powerful a collaborative conversation can be. Often teachers feel that they work in isolation or that they must have all the answers. I dislike the idea of waiting two years to explore possibilities when ESL students are struggling and, in some cases, this would be a disservice to students. With appropriate background information and student-related data to discuss, effective decisions related to struggling ESL students can be made. When information on culturally sensitive assessment is made available to teachers, then we can improve our practices in culturally responsive teaching and culturally sensitive assessment. When asked what related areas teachers would like to learn about, the most commonly picked items were ESL strategies and ESL assessment. Training in these areas has been offered by the district, but for the most part, in a hit-or-miss manner. Training needs to be offered systemically. The district is exploring the area of culturally sensitive assessment, and a share site with resources and research will be rolled out with SFSS and inclusive learning staff next month. It will be essential for this information to then be extended into our schools.

Appendix A

My ELL Is Struggling with Learning! A Preferral Conversation

Considerations and Tips for the Classroom Teacher

- How do you address the diverse assessment and instructional needs of bilingual students with learning and behaviour problems?
- When students struggle, how do you know if it is an unaddressed learning need or an undiagnosed disorder?
- What is the information needed and how should it be used? Who can help?
- What are the appropriate actions to take after collecting the information?

Asking the Right Questions

Background

Has a family interview been done by an EPS intercultural consultant (check Pinpoint)? It includes information on student health, developmental history, social and adaptive functioning, family structure, immigration history and family concerns. Any other assessments on file?

Education

Has the student been in school before? What was the language of instruction? Are there gaps in the student's education? If so, why? Has there been sufficient intensity of instruction? Is the quality of instruction known?

Home Language

Are languages other than English spoken at home? What language(s) does the student speak? Is the student maintaining the ability to communicate with family members?

Language Proficiency

What is the student's language proficiency and literacy? Is the student developing the home language (social and academic) at a normal rate?

English

Does the student need assistance with learning English? Is the student acquiring English at a normal rate? What is the current proficiency in social and academic language? What are the ESL proficiency benchmark levels for listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Achievement

What is the student's level and rate of achievement? Is this normal for the general student population? What are the most effective instructional strategies that have been used?

Behaviour

Is the student's emotional stability developmentally and culturally appropriate? Are there individual or family circumstances that may explain the observed behaviour?

Adaptation

What is the student's level of acculturation? Is the student at risk for culture shock? Is the student adapting to the school at a normal rate? Is the student interacting socially? Is the student socially or linguistically isolated? (Collier 2007a)

Instructional Needs

Do the curriculum demands match the student's language skills? What are the instructional needs for this student? Has student been exposed to positive, yet realistic standards? What interventions have been used? How long have they been used and how effective have they been?

To best determine difference from disability, educators at a minimal must

- make certain the various evidence-based interventions have been tried,
- engage in culturally/linguistically appropriate interventions with ELLs,
- develop and use effective decision-making strategies and practices to make team decisions,
- ensure that team members are able to make informed data-driven decisions about ELLs and their needs using all available and relevant progress monitoring data and
- use the information to lead to a course of action that is instructionally meaningful and beneficial to the student.

Reading Challenges to Be Expected for ELLs

1. Phonological awareness
 - First language may not include the same phonemes
2. Alphabetic principle
 - Differences in orthographies can be confusing, learning letters and sounds can seem abstract
3. Fluency
 - ELLs typically have fewer opportunities to read aloud and receive feedback
 - May read more slowly with less understanding
4. Vocabulary
 - Students may become proficient at decoding, but not comprehend due to lack of English vocabulary
 - Students often struggle with many kinds of common words and expressions
5. Reading comprehension
 - Influenced by oral language proficiency, word recognition skills, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, ability to use comprehension strategies, variations in text structure, interest and cultural differences
 - Appropriate and alternative ways to show understanding should be developed and focus should be on content and reading for meaning (Klinger, Hoover and Baca 2008)

Response to Intervention (RTI): Advantages for ELLs

- Focuses on prevention, early identification of needs, increasing levels of intervention (if needed)
- Scientifically based interventions
- A self-correcting process
- Collects data systematically on the effects of intervention, determines effective instruction
- Involves integrated teacher teams focused on language and transition issues

How to Implement and Monitor Instructional Intervention (RTI)

- Tier 1 Universal Screening: procedures used to identify students who may need further support
- Tier 2 Students with Significant Needs: establish strength- and needs-based instructional

intervention programs based on classroom-based data gathering and behaviour monitoring; document and monitor instructional intervention (6–8 weeks)

- Emphasize strategy fitness during intervention: select appropriate tightly targeted strategies (research-based) for specific identified and documented issues
- Tier 3 More Intensive Interventions Needed: Formal referral may be needed after a prereferral analysis of information and data gathered during enrolment and instructional intervention (Blatchley and Lau 2010)

Considerations: Recommended Instructional Practices

Decision Points When Students Struggle with Reading

Is my instruction culturally, linguistically and pedagogically appropriate to meet students' needs? If not, how can I adjust instruction to be more appropriate?

When the following practices are in place, and the student continues to struggle, additional support should be provided. Struggling ELLs need small-group interventions that are explicit, responsive to their needs, personalized, relevant and not based on a deficit view of the students. Some ELLs truly have learning disabilities and a wait-and-see approach is not necessarily in the student's best interest.

- A strong, positive relationship with the child and his or her family
- The child's linguistic and cultural background is valued
- Personalized instruction—classroom learning is connected to the child's daily experiences
- Attention is given to effect, interest and motivation
- Attention is given to the development of oral language
- Awareness of aspects of reading that can be confusing for ELLs
- Which sounds and letters are different in the child's first language so misunderstandings can be clarified and additional practice can be provided

- Instruction with additional support when students do not seem to understand (for example, explicit instruction at their level, more opportunities for meaningful practice)
- Books used are at levels students can read and understand
- Key vocabulary is pretaught, and multimedia, real items and other appealing visuals are used
- The content of students' responses is given more attention than the form when checking for comprehension, and multiple and varied ways of demonstrating learning are provided. (Adapted from Klinger, Hoover and Baca 2008)
- 5. IQ tests have limitations for culturally and linguistically diverse students.
- 6. Opportunities to learn which include accommodations to address cultural and linguistic differences.
- 7. Cultural and linguistic factors relative to suspected problem are addressed.
- 8. Classroom observations completed.
- 9. Parent interactions encouraged and valued.
- 10. Proper interpretation and use of progress-monitoring data.
- 11. Progress data corroborated with authentic, classroom-based information, observations and interviews. (Adapted from Klinger, Hoover and Baca 2008)

The Referral Process: Issues for Problem-Solving Teams

School teams should consider the following when addressing the instructional intervention needs of struggling ELLs:

1. Difference versus disability. Ensure that limited English proficiency is not mistaken for a learning disability.
2. Proper time for appropriate referral. Formal assessment referral should only occur after multi-tiered interventions have been implemented.
3. Proper language of instruction/assessment. Teams must instruct/assess ELLs in their most proficient language to determine difference from disability. (Intercultural consultants can assist through translation and must be used properly.)
4. Limited English proficiency and IQ. Limited proficiency in English does not indicate low IQ or inability to use higher-order thinking skills.

5. IQ tests have limitations for culturally and linguistically diverse students.
6. Opportunities to learn which include accommodations to address cultural and linguistic differences.
7. Cultural and linguistic factors relative to suspected problem are addressed.
8. Classroom observations completed.
9. Parent interactions encouraged and valued.
10. Proper interpretation and use of progress-monitoring data.
11. Progress data corroborated with authentic, classroom-based information, observations and interviews. (Adapted from Klinger, Hoover and Baca 2008)

Caution with Standardized Assessments

A major source of error in assessment leading to invalid results is produced by the interaction of the student with the test item, and language, or the interaction of the student with the test item, and dialect.

Assessment features designed for native English speakers may pose significant problems for ELLs.

The concept of dialect is relevant to addressing the tremendous linguistic and cultural diversity that may exist within the broad linguistic groups of ELLs who are users of the same given language. No matter what language, that person is using a particular dialect (standard or nonstandard) of that language. (Collier 2007a)

Appendix B

My ELL Is Struggling with Learning! A Prereferral Conversation—Feedback

Thank you for participating in this process! Clearly, identifying culturally or linguistically diverse students with learning disabilities is complex. Please provide some feedback on the collaborative conversation process.

1. Student Information:

Cultural background _____

First language _____

Length of time in English education _____

Your concern or question _____

2. What did this prereferral conversation involve?

____ Conversation with inclusive learning ESL consultant

____ Review of English language proficiency assessment (including family interview)

____ Student interview/current assessment by inclusive learning ESL consultant

____ Student classroom observation by inclusive learning ESL consultant

3. Did this information assist you in determining whether more information on the student is needed? _____

4. Did this information bring up issues or possibilities you had not previously considered? Please comment.

5. Did the information provided assist you in identifying whether student may benefit from a formal assessment? _____

6. What are your next steps?

7. Do you feel you have enough information about the student to share with the specialist? _____

8. Is a collaborative conversation a useful way to determine further actions to benefit the student's learning?

Yes No

Comments

9. Do you have ideas to improve this process?

10. Would any of the topics be of interest to you for further reference or training?

____ Language acquisition

____ ESL strategies and accommodations

____ ESL assessment practices

____ Culturally responsive teaching

____ Strength-based instruction and RTI

____ Special needs and diverse students

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Literature Review: Issues Related to Culturally Sensitive Assessment for At-Risk Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students

by Nancy Musica

Introduction

“Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with and at risk for disabilities evidence the greatest need for quality instructional programs of all students in our schools because of disproportionate academic underachievement, special education referrals and disciplinary actions” (Cartledge and Kourea 2008). English language learners face the task of learning a new language that takes five to seven years and even longer when students have not had a continuous school history. This learning takes place in phases developing both basic and academic communication skills (Thomas and Collier 2002). In Edmonton Public Schools, the recognition of inappropriate referrals and placement in special needs programs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students has led to initiatives like initial screening for English language proficiency, a culturally sensitive assessment working group and guidelines around when and how at-risk students are identified for formal assessment in identification for special needs programming. Research considering the inherent difficulties of identifying and assessing at-risk CLD students and the exploration of promising alternatives will be considered in this literature review, with a particular emphasis on reading disabilities.

Learning Disabilities

Low-incidence, high-severity disorders, such as profound developmental disorders, severe hearing and visual impairments, are often identified before children reach school age through a medical model. High-incidence, low-severity disorders, including learning disabilities, are not outwardly visible and more likely to be identified by school personnel. Wagner, Francis and Morris (2005) maintain that “learning disabilities are viewed as the result of an interaction between an individual’s characteristics and demands of the educational environment that interact to determine the specific manifestation.”

Severe reading disabilities seem to represent around 5 per cent of the population in all alphabetic languages, but the specific orthography plays a role in the decoding strategies those readers of different languages use (Wagner, Francis and Morris 2005). It makes sense that a percentage of our CLD students will have reading disabilities, and educators must access effective identification and intervention methods. Samson and Lesaux (2009) cite research that weaknesses developing mastery of sounds (phonology), noted as early as kindergarten, can predict later difficulties. Unfortunately there is also a misconception that with increased English proficiency, these skills will develop without a need for targeted intervention.

Reading problems are often not identified until Grade 2 or 3 because a learning disability requires a significant discrepancy to emerge on typical standardized tests even when there is evidence that a student is struggling in the early years. In an American national study investigating over- and underrepresentation of language-minority students in special education, Samson and Lesaux (2009) found an underrepresentation of language-minority students in kindergarten and Grade 1 and an overrepresentation in Grade 3 across all disability categories. They suggest a shift to early identification and intervention for all children. They contend that language minority students at risk for reading difficulties not identified early are at a major disadvantage in overcoming their disabilities through remediation.

To determine whether a student has a learning disability, school personnel are usually required by

policy to administer an intelligence test. Gunderson and Siegel (2001) state, “A specific learning disability may be found if (1) the child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability when provided with appropriate educational experiences, and (2) the child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more areas relating to communication skills and mathematical abilities.” Although their use of the word *evil* when describing the use of IQ tests may be a bit extreme, they argue that the discrepancy model using IQ tests does not actually differentiate students with reading disabilities and can lead to certain students not accessing the appropriate academic support and interventions they need. They recommend instead that teachers administer individual achievement tests and analyze the results, focusing on the types of errors made. Making a difference for the student will depend on the development of early instruction based on a thoughtful analysis of the student’s needs and abilities. They maintain time, support and staff development to administer and interpret formal and informal measures are needed.

Instructional Experiences

Cummins (1984) maintains that limited English proficiency students have academic difficulties that are “pedagogically induced.” This means that the instruction they have received has not met their unique needs as diverse learners. Other researchers argue that CLD students at risk for learning disabilities are least likely to be taught with the most effective evidence-based instruction (Cartledge and Kourea 2008).

Developing culturally responsive classrooms for culturally and linguistically diverse students at risk for learning disabilities has many components. Cartledge and Kourea (2008) cite empirical evidence that indicates clear goals, high rates of academic responding, appropriate pacing and progressive monitoring are effective for these students. They also emphasize “a sense of urgency” since good intensive instruction can prevent or minimize disabilities for at-risk students. Research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse students, including ELLs, fall further and further behind as they move through

the grades (Hart and Risley 1995). Becoming a proficient reader allows students to develop in other cognitive areas (intelligence), so when reading skills are limited, less information and less learning occurs. Stanovich (1986) coined the term for this mutual reinforcement as the *Matthew effect*. In other words, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

Klinger, Hoover and Baca (2008) suggest practices for CLD students, and suggest if the student continues to struggle, additional support should be provided. They maintain some ELLs truly have learning disabilities—and a wait-and-see approach is not in the student’s best interest. The authors suggest ELLs need small-group interventions that are explicit, responsive to their needs, personalized, relevant to their daily experiences and not based on a deficit view of the students. They also recommend that teachers develop a strong, positive relationship with the child and his or her family where the language and culture are valued. Instructional practices should also include attention to student interest and motivation, opportunities to develop oral language, awareness of aspects of the first language that can cause confusion, use of visuals, preteaching of key vocabulary and attention to content over form when checking for comprehension, use of books at the correct instructional level, meaningful practice and the provision of additional support when needed. The term *double-sheltering* is used to describe the need for effective language acquisition instruction and accommodations for learning deficiencies for ESL with learning disabilities (Artiles and Ortiz 2002).

Problems with Standardized Tests: IQ Measures

Gunderson and Siegel (2001) point out that standardized IQ tests consist of measures of factual knowledge, definitions of words, memory recall, fine-motor coordination and fluency of expressive language but likely do not measure problem-solving skills. In other words, they measure what students have learned and not their capacity to learn. The authors insist that when IQ tests are used on students who do not speak English as their first language, then they must be considered measures of second (or nonprimary) language skills. Perhaps the most important consideration when discussing IQ

measures is that “memory, learning, perceiving and problem solving cannot be measured except through content. And content is always culturally related” (Gunderson and Siegel 2001). In other words, intelligence is not pure but may be a measure of how a person functions in North American culture. It should be emphasized that in formal assessments, school psychologists collect a wide variety of information about a student in order to make programming recommendations. IQ measures provide only a portion of that information.

Everyone mentions test bias when it comes to IQ tests. Skiba, Knesting and Bush (2002) suggest a broader context than the historical overemphasis on test bias in explaining the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. They put forth the pervasive influence of differential educational opportunity as the root of the problem. If this is true, then making adjustments in the assessment process will likely be ineffective. The authors suggest other areas to examine in developing culturally competent assessment. These include assessing cultural competence of the examiner, educational opportunity for all students, quality of remediation programs, previous academic experiences of students and related effects on motivation and the use of low-inference assessment strategies.

Alternative Methods

Cultural Sensitivity and Parental Involvement

Educators sometimes express frustration when working with families because of differing cultural perspectives, and these differences can be perceived as resistance or apathy. Rules and regulations around education and special needs are based on traditional middle class, western assumptions and ideals that may not match those of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Authorities on culturally responsive instruction consistently point to the cultural dissonance between the home and school as a contributor to poor educational outcomes (Cartledge and Kourea 2008). Dennis and Giangreco (1996) urge special educators to explore more flexible and culturally sensitive approaches in working with these families. It is important to

enhance communication, build trusting relationships and welcome family involvement. Multiple factors influence perspectives, including language, religion, heritage, family composition, family work practices and roles, implications of poverty, acculturation into the majority cultural group and experiences of living in a family with a special needs child. Being aware of the differences and of one’s own assumptions and biases related to those families is an important part of delivering culturally sensitive services. Exploring the deficit world views held by some educators when dealing with minority students and systemic deficit models have an effect on the instructional-referral-assessment process (Ochoa 2005). A family-centred approach based on listening and personal reflection where the family is allowed to articulate their priorities has been recommended. Dennis and Giangreco (1996) suggest culturally diverse professionals in the field of special education could provide information on effective methods of conducting family interviews. Ortiz (1992) recommends collecting cultural and linguistic information on students, increasing collaboration between schools and minority communities and empowering minority students in addition to adapting curriculum and assessment practices before referrals for special learning needs are considered.

Process-Dependent Measures

Testing bias could possibly be reduced if measures that emphasize processing abilities are employed rather than those dependent on prior knowledge and experience. Examples include memory tasks like digit span, working memory and nonword repetition, some perceptual tasks such as discrimination and sequencing of tones and competing stimuli tasks such as filtered or competing words (Laing and Kamhi 2003). Campbell, Dollaghan, Needlemen and Janoski (1997) found that culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD) obtained significantly lower scores than mainstream children on knowledge tasks, but there was no significant difference on the processing-dependent measures. Further studies support this and are cited by Laing and Kamhi (2003), suggesting a correlation between children who perform poorly on processing-dependent measures and language learning difficulties.

Curriculum-Based Assessment

Curriculum-based assessment can be carried out in two ways. Curriculum-based evaluation (CBE) is based on classroom tasks, and curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is based on a standardized form where classroom tasks have been normed and tested for reliability and validity. Both follow the test-teach-test model. This means the teacher collects baseline functioning on a targeted task or skill, determines an intervention to address the content or skill, conducts the intervention and retests to check progress. Issues when using these forms of assessment with at-risk CLD students include interpreting the results and finding evidence to indicate a learning disability (Barrera 2006).

Dynamic Assessment

The most familiar approach to dynamic assessment is test-teach-retest. This method has been found to differentiate weaker learners in various CLD populations (Laing and Kamhi 2003). Graduated prompting is also a method used in dynamic assessment. This is where graduated prompts are used to see if a child is stimulable in such areas as speech production, language forms and structures. In this process prompting, assessment and interventions for a particular intervention occur simultaneously. This process has also been used to predict early reading abilities. If an educator determines target skills to complete a task, a series of prompts from least to most supportive can be developed. A scoring system can be used to chart the progress in attaining the teaching goal. This method of instruction and assessment is not based on life experience, literacy knowledge or socialization practices and can be quick and easy to administer.

Barrera (2006) proposes a revised framework for defining learning disabilities and suggests a treatment validity model combining response to intervention with a dual discrepancy model of assessment. If students do not respond to increasingly intense forms of intervention (used as prereferral information), then formal assessment could be considered. This is providing other factors such as socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic, lack of exposure to curriculum or other types of disabilities have been ruled out. This process

assumes that good research-proven instruction works on CLD students, and if it doesn't, then one can assume a learning disability. This kind of assumption could be dangerous in special education where the one-size-fits-all method does not work. The author contends that further research is needed to show which interventions work with LD CLD students and, more important, that we need to stop "defining" students and, instead, address their needs.

Barrera (2006) details his initial study in which teachers assessed secondary ESL student work samples using a curriculum-based dynamic assessment process (CDA). Students identified as high achievers, general education students, ESL and LD, and ESL-only students were compared. Their task was to write notes, and a pretest was carried out to determine their skills. They were then taught a procedure for writing notes in continuous instruction and were to keep a reflection and analysis journal for two weeks as they learned content vocabulary. Teachers were given two hours of training in scoring. High-achieving learners outperformed the other groups as predicted and wrote minimal but more economical notes. General education students also wrote more economical notes but did not always produce high results. ESL and LD students wrote more notes, despite a lower quality of results. In some cases the ESL-only students outperformed the general education students but not the high-achieving students. The results are promising in that educators were able to use systematic information processing-related learner data that could be used to improve decision making. This practitioner-based review is often reserved for specialists like psychologists and reading specialists.

Universal Screening and Response to Intervention

Based on her study carried out in the North Vancouver School District, Lipka and Siegel (2010) maintain that children as young as five years old can be identified for reading difficulties by teachers and school personnel. All of the kindergarten children in the district were included in the study and assessed prior to beginning reading instruction. Through universal screening, 44 per cent of English-speaking and 54 per cent of ESL children were identified as at

a significant risk for reading difficulties. These students received classroom remediation using a phonological awareness and vocabulary development program called Firm Foundations in Grade 1 and a reading comprehension program called Reading 44 in Grade 2. When these students reached the end of Grade 6, results showed 1.9 per cent of the native English speakers and 2.3 per cent of the ESL students were showing dyslexia. This was significant because for students without remediation, usually 15 per cent of students at that age show dyslexia. This study indicates that remediation can be effective at the classroom level in developing both reading decoding and comprehension skills. Siegel also notes that bilingualism can even be an advantage in developing literacy skills, citing the ELL dyslexics scored higher on phonological awareness and spelling tasks than the native English speaking dyslexics in the study. This method of identification and remediation was found to be successful as well as efficient and cost-effective. In addition, when the students began school, there was a strong connection between socioeconomic level and language, phonological awareness and letter identification. This relationship dropped significantly when the students had been in school for one year and had been exposed to the reading remediation program.

Vaughn et al (2006) designed a study involving American Grade 1 ESL students (Spanish/English) identified at risk for learning disabilities. Universal screening was used in four schools across two districts and 22 per cent were found to be at risk (48 students). Intervention groups of three to five at-risk ESL students met daily for 50 minutes over seven months and were provided with systematic and explicit instruction in oral language and reading by trained bilingual reading intervention teachers. The control group ESL at-risk students received their schools' existing reading interventions designed for struggling readers. The intervention students significantly outperformed the control group students on multiple measures of English letter awareness, phonological awareness and other skills, and reading and academic achievement. The intervention was designed on effective practices for beginning readers who are ESL. These include explicit teaching, promotion of English learning, phonemic awareness

and decoding, vocabulary development, interactive teaching designed to engage students and instruction that creates opportunities for accurate responses and corrective feedback for struggling students. This approach has been mandated in California, Arizona and Massachusetts.

Implications

The research expounds the difficulties involved with testing culturally and linguistically diverse students at risk for learning disabilities, but promising practices seem to be emerging. Some traditional approaches have been criticized, such as IQ tests. Although it is complicated, it is important to identify CLD students at risk for and with learning disabilities. Many of the strategies used to develop early reading skills for English-speaking students work for CLD students. In addition, research-supported ESL strategies to provide language support may also help these students in learning to read. Universal screening and early-targeted remediation carried out by teachers seem to be effective means to mitigate significant reading problems before the gap widens. This may lead to fewer referrals for formal assessment, early identification of at-risk learners and may reduce the representation of CLD students in special education programs in the older grades. Making data-driven decisions to inform instruction and remediation is critical, and teachers need training in this area. Failure to respond to remediation may also indicate when a more specialized tier of intervention is needed and when formal assessment and help from specialists is needed. Most important in this process, the student information and data gathered from the family and the student and response to intervention methods must lead to a course of action that is instructionally meaningful and beneficial to the student.

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Reports of the Members at Large

Edmonton Public

by Lynn Farrugia



Musings from the desk of a passionate advocate for English language learners

Well here goes! I have been “accused” recently of being possibly a wee bit too passionate about my work, and that comment got me thinking. Can we

be too passionate in our work when it comes to our students? I really don’t think so; if not us, who then? Who will step forward and ensure that the over 80,000 English language learners in our Alberta schools will have their learning needs met?

If you are reading this, you are most likely a member of ESLC and work with English language learners and may feel the same as I do. Every day we work with these amazing students and see their potential, but we also see the many obstacles they face, including a lack of programming in some schools, a lack of funding to provide the appropriate programming and a lack of understanding that some teachers and administrators have when it comes to ELLs and their needs. These are just some of the challenges in our schools, but what about the challenges they face outside of school? So many of our students live in poverty, have family and cultural pressures that we can only just begin to imagine and many are living with the very serious effects of trauma. Who helps these students? Yes, there are outside agencies and support organizations in our communities, but who is supporting these students in our schools? Who is ultimately responsible for their education? In a perfect world, we all are—society is—but, in our classrooms, it is up to us. We need to step up and say, “What does Mario, SoSo or

Muslima need to succeed in my class?” Then we must do our very best to find strategies, resources and whatever else is necessary to support those students. We must advocate for them with our administrators and whoever else can help us help them.

I think of the thousands of students with special needs in our province whose parents put their lives on hold to advocate for their children to ensure their unique learning needs are met. I admire and applaud those parents. There are many organizations that provide supports to these parents and help them navigate the complicated education system. It is hard enough to do all of this when you speak English, but imagine if you do not understand or speak the language. I believe that is where we come in; we must play that role of advocate for our ELL students and their unique learning needs because their parents may not be able to.

ESLC wants to find out what you, the teachers in our classrooms, need to best support ELLs. We are looking to do a needs assessment. We think we know what you want, but feel that we need to hear directly from our membership and the many other teachers who work with ELLs in this province, because as you already know the population of ELLs is growing and spreading throughout the province. Start thinking about what you need from the ESLC to help you be an advocate for your ELLs.

So be on the lookout for the upcoming needs assessment and spread the word to all teachers of ELLs so their voices can be heard, too.

I ask you, are you too passionate about your work? I hope so!

Calgary Catholic

by Diane Costello

Please note that Diane Costello has kindly taken over the MAL duties while Samantha Tomlinson is on leave. Thanks, Diane!

The Calgary Catholic School District continues to offer a wide range of supports and programs to meet the needs of English language learners and their families. District partnerships with various immigrant-serving agencies play an integral role in

serving our diverse communities and in enhancing our professional growth.

District professional development has focused on engaging all students for success. An emphasis has been placed on teachers gaining a deeper understanding of language proficiency and effective programming through use of the Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks.

In an effort to support students with transition to senior high school in Canada, Calgary Catholic School District continues to offer an ELL Literacy/Numeracy Summer School Program for students in Grades 9–12. Along with further development of literacy and numeracy skills, the program also creates meaningful experiences for students through weekly field trips to local destinations.

Two programs are offered to district staff to support their English language development within the workplace. Through these sessions, caretakers and support staff focus on building the language skills and cultural understanding necessary in their daily work.

Central Alberta

by Connie Coe and Teresa Borchers

The ESLC annual conference held November 14–16, 2013, was a huge success. An 18-member volunteer committee from Red Deer Catholic Schools did a tremendous job organizing the event. About 135 delegates attended from across the province to “Realize the Possibilities of Every Child, Every Day.” Internationally renowned keynote

speaker specializing in ESL and literacy Rachel Carillo Syrja provided valuable insight into supporting our growing ESL population in Alberta. She delivered a compelling message focusing on building a welcoming community for ELLs and the use of high-leverage instructional strategies to support language acquisition. Her book, *How to Reach and Teach English Language Learners: Practical Strategies to Ensure Success* is a valuable resource to support educators working with ELLs.

The conference also offered council delegates a film festival highlighting a variety of documentaries as well as an interactive refugee camp. A documentary titled, *Ladder of My Life*, by Monybany Dau, once a boy soldier in Sudan, showcased an incredible story of resilience from Dau’s perspective. As well, Brandy Yanchyk, a Canadian filmmaker and journalist, was excited to show three of her works including, *Brooks: A City of 100 Hellos*, which has been aired on CBC and PBS in the USA, as well as *Oil Calling* and *Nature’s Invitation*. The Central Alberta Refugee Efforts (CARE) also showcased a refugee camp where participants were given the opportunity to explore what life is like in a refugee camp.

In addition, many valuable sessions were held, ranging from supporting ELLs in the math class, using technology to enhance language acquisition, to making sense of the Alberta K–12 ESL Proficiency Benchmarks. More information on these sessions and others can be found on www.esl2013.com. We look forward to the 2014 ESLC Conference, which will continue to help us grow in supporting our English language learners.

Join the ESLC Executive Committee

by Bebe Vocong

Our council exists because of the dedication of so many teachers in this province who have a passion for teaching English language learners. If you would like to contribute more to the English as a Second Language Council (ESLC), then please consider joining the executive committee. The following is a list of elected positions and vacancies for this upcoming year.

Although a general description of the duties and responsibilities of these vacancies is listed below, I encourage you to refer to the *Executive Handbook of the English as a Second Language Council* on our website (www.eslcata.com). All of these executive positions will be elected and appointed at the annual general meeting at the ESLC conference, which will be held at the DoubleTree by Hilton, in Edmonton. If you are interested, please refer to the application form for the executive council positions enclosed with this issue of *Accent* and on our website. The deadline for your application is September 30, 2014. I hope that you will consider being a part of this fantastic professional learning opportunity! Please

contact Bebe Vocong (ataeslcpastpresident@gmail.com) if you are interested and/or if you have any questions.

The following are elected positions:

Secretary: Take minutes of meetings (AGM, executive committee and table officers), send minutes to all executive committee members, be responsible for all ATA correspondence, and maintain an accurate mailing list of the executive committee members and report any changes to Barnett House.

Treasurer: Take charge of all money received and/or collected by the council, keep an accurate record of the council's financial affairs, provide a statement of revenue/expenditure at each meeting, assume responsibility for having books audited by Barnett House, prepare a proposed yearly budget to present at AGM and provide consultative services to the conference director.

The following are vacant appointed positions:

Member at Large (MAL) for Southern Alberta: Promote membership within the region that would be situated south of Calgary, assist with conferences, resource fairs and conventions in the region and contribute to *Accent* by writing articles or soliciting submissions.

Conference Director(s) 2016: Plan and carry out the council's annual conference in consultation with the executive council, attend the Specialist Council Seminar at the ATA Summer Conference and liaise with the current conference directors.

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Personal information regarding any person named in this document is for the sole purpose of professional consultation between members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

