Assessing Young Dual-Language Learners

by Ida Rose Florez

Early educators play a leading role in young children's learning and development. To lead and teach well, they need a solid understanding of each child's development and learning needs. But assessing young children who are learning more than one language can pose challenges, especially when teachers do not speak the child's home language. With increasing numbers of language-diverse children in early care and education settings, teachers need skills and knowledge that allow them to assess all children in all of the languages they speak.

Young children take a variety of language development paths. Many children learn two or more languages from birth. Others learn the home language first and the dominant language (English in the United States) when they enter non-parental care and education settings. For some children exposure to languages fluctuates as family or caregivers move in and out of their lives. In this article all children learning more than one language are referred to as dual language learners (DLLs).

Principles for Assessing Young DLLs

Valid assessment of young DLLs begins with the same principles for assessing all young children. Assessing young children requires teachers, caregivers, and other professionals to collect information from a variety of sources, on multiple occasions, using a variety of methods and materials. A single assessment 'session' cannot adequately assess a young child's capabilities.

For young DLLs, assessment should accurately reflect their competencies across both languages and in environments

Dr. Florez works for WestEd's Center for Child and Family Studies where she specializes in early childhood systems development. Before joining WestEd, Ida Rose was Senior Director, Strategic Initiatives, with Arizona's Early Childhood Development and Health Board. In that capacity she oversaw Arizona's early childhood professional development system-building efforts and served as assessment consultant to the Arizona Department of Education. Dr. Florez holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology with a focus in early childhood assessment from the University of Arizona. As a school psychologist, Dr. Florez has over 20 years experience providing expert early childhood developmental, educational, and assessment consultation.

and within relationships that use both the home language and English. This principle applies to assessment of all developmental domains. Key to valid assessment of DLLs is avoiding the assumption that children's functioning in English, or in environments where only English is spoken, represents all they know and can do. Young DLLs often demonstrate skills and competencies at home that they do not exhibit elsewhere. Even if a child appears fluent in English, if another language is spoken at home, valid assessment requires collecting assessment information across *both* settings and languages.

Like the assessment of all young children, partnering with parents or other family members is one of the best ways to collect information. Parents know a lot about their children. In addition to providing pregnancy, birth, developmental, and medical histories, parents can share the child's 'language story.' Knowing the story of a child's language development helps teachers understand the child's progression through the periods of dual-language development (see sidebar). Understanding children's unique developmental experiences helps teachers make accurate decisions about supporting children's learning and development, and about when, and if, a child should be evaluated for delays or disabilities.

Types of Assessments

Assessment of individual children serves one of three broad purposes:

1. To help teachers and family members support children's learning.
2. To screen children to ensure they are on course developmentally.
3. To evaluate children for delays or disabilities.

Teachers focus primarily on the first purpose, which is called *formative assessment*. Formative assessments are information-gathering practices teachers embed in their everyday interactions with children. They are inseparable from children's learning experiences and are the best

approach for improving children's learning and development, regardless of language status.

Formative assessments of young DLLs require teachers to intentionally plan how to capture developmental information across all domains, including development in both languages. Often teachers need to strengthen their observational skills, to learn to assess children's development through a variety of non-verbal means. The sidebar on the following page provides five practical ways to develop skills for conducting formative assessments of young DLLs.

The two other types of child assessment — screening for appropriate developmental progress and evaluation for delays or disabilities — require formal assessment instruments. Screening and evaluation of young DLL children requires great care. If educators and caregivers do not recognize the developmental patterns of dual-language acquisition, a child may end up diagnosed with a disability, even if the child is developing as expected. At the same time, it is critical to ensure young DLLs who *are* experiencing a delay or other disability are appropriately referred for evaluation.

Decisions to refer children for developmental screening should begin with information from formative assessments, and should be made in close consultation with family members. Most often, a rich portfolio of formative assessment information creates a clear developmental picture, indicating if a referral is warranted. If the decision remains unclear, parents and teachers should create a plan for gathering more information and set a time frame to revisit the decision. Two to three months usually provides an adequate window to reconsider a referral. During that time it is often helpful for the parent to consult with the child's doctor and for the teacher to have the child observed by a bilingual school psychologist or speech therapist, or other developmental professional. If a parent requests screening or evaluation, their request should be honored without delay.

As with all young children, formal assessment instruments used with DLLs must be valid for that purpose. Screening instruments compare a child's growth and development to typically-developing children to determine if the assessed child is progressing as expected. Because the typical language development of DLLs differs from children learning a single language, comparing a young DLL to typically-developing monolingual children would not yield valid results. Currently, there are very few assessments that allow comparisons of referred children to typically-developing DLLs. Teachers and parents should ask assessors whether screening or evaluation results are from instruments devel-

Language Development Story

Teachers of young DLLS can learn important information about a child's language development by asking parents or family members to tell the child's language development story.

1. What language(s) and dialect(s) does the child speak?

2. What is the language status of the main characters in the child's life: family members, neighbors, and the child's community?

3. How often does the child hear each language?

4. In what language does the action occur? What activities does the child engage in, in each language (such as watching television, talking with Nana on the phone, attending religious services, listing to stories or book reading)?

5. What developmental milestones has the child accomplished (first words, phrases, complete sentences) and when, in both languages?

6. How does the child use language to interact with the main characters in her story? Does she code-switch (intermingle both languages)? Does he appear to understand in one language, but regularly answers in the other? Does she switch language depending on what the listener speaks and understands?

7. How developed are the child's 'acting' skills? How does she use gesture and non-verbal communication to express herself?

8. What is the story's setting? How do cultural patterns guide the child's language use? How are questions used? What are the cultural expectations for how children use language? Are they to listen? Is it acceptable for them to speak directly to adults? How does the culture use props or non-verbal language to communicate?

Adapted from Preschool English learners: Principles and practices to promote language, literacy, and learning. *California Department of Education (2009).*

Developing Dual-Language Assessment Skills

Many teachers struggle to assess children who do not speak the teachers' language. At first it can be daunting to assess children through non-verbal means or through others who speak the child's language (such as teacher-assistants, parents, and the child's peers). Here are five practical ways to develop DLL assessment skills:

1. Watch videos of young children engaged in learning experiences with the sound off and take anecdotal records of developmental indicators. Observe an individual child or groups of children interacting.
   a. How does the child use gestures (such as pointing, nodding, reaching, or holding up fingers to indicate quantity)?
   b. Does the child initiate play?
   c. Does he pick up objects with a developmentally-appropriate grasp?
   d. Where does the child focus attention?
   e. Does she shift attention between people or objects appropriately?
   f. How does the child handle books?

   It is also helpful to watch a video in which children and adults all speak an unfamiliar language. Observe the rhythm and pace of reciprocal verbal exchanges, and how facial and non-verbal communications support meaningful communication. Note how the child responds to peers and adults.

2. View a video where children speak English and at least one other language. Watch the video with a colleague who speaks both languages. Take detailed observational notes. Afterwards, compare notes and discuss differences and similarities of observations.

3. Examine child-created drawings or photographs of child-created block constructions.
   a. Does the child draw shapes?
   b. Does the child group objects by size, or shape, or function?
   c. If possible, watch a child create a drawing or construction, and describe the child's process.
      • Did the child draw from left to right?
      • Use props or models?
      • Share blocks or crayons?
      • Ask other children to share?
      • Persist when blocks were difficult to balance?
      • Ask for help?
   All these actions (and many more) are observable without understanding the child's language.

4. Practice partnering with other adults who speak the child's language to collect information about the child's functioning. Observe the child interacting with the bilingual adult. Afterwards, debrief and ask the bilingual adult to clarify what you observed.

5. Ask a bilingual adult to interpret a conversation between you and the child. When teachers' interactions with children are supported by an interpreting adult, engage the child with facial expressions and non-verbal cues in the same way one would if speaking to a child in a shared language. Speak directly to the child, make appropriate eye contact, smile, and make sure to be at the child's eye level. When the child responds, continue to engage directly, even if the child looks at the adult who is interpreting.

oped for use with the assessed child's age and language group. Ethically, all assessors are obligated to discuss the limits of the assessments they use with teachers and parents.

Sometimes, as a means of learning more about the child's development and when an appropriate instrument does not exist, assessors will administer items from an instrument that was not developed for use with a particular age or language group. Under these circumstances, a score should not be generated or reported, especially if the assessment was administered only in English. As with assessment of all young children, results of formal assessments of DLLs need to be interpreted within the context of assessment information gathered from the child's family and educational setting.

Assessing young DLL children follows the same principles as assessing all young children. Although assessing children who speak a language other than English can be daunting for teachers, developing formative assessment skills that rely on a broad range of observational techniques helps teachers become better observers of all young children. Teachers and caregivers can also be advocates for the appropriate assessment of young DLLs, ensuring that formal assessments are used appropriately and contribute to the healthy growth and development of the children they serve.

References

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Periods of Dual Language Development

Children entering non-parental care and education settings with limited or no exposure to English typically move through four periods of Dual Language Development (Tabor and Snow, 2001). Not all children experience all four periods and children frequently fluctuate between periods.

■ **Home language use.** Initially, children attempt to use their home language to communicate with others even if they do not understand the home language. This strategy is often effective with peers, especially in play. All young children are language learners and rely on a variety of nonverbal cues to understand each other. Play usually provides a rich enough context that children can understand each other with limited language proficiency.

■ **Observational and listening period.** During this period children pay keen attention to the language of their new environment and the nonverbal cues that support its meaning. Just as infants intently focus on the pattern and meaning of language, young DLLs engage in intense listening and watching as they learn to decode the new language.

■ **Telegraphic and formulaic speech.** Once young children gain enough understanding of the second language, they begin using a word or short phrase to represent more complex meaning. Just as a toddler may say, "Up" to mean "I want you to pick me up," young DLLs begin to experiment with the new language by 'telegraphing' their meaning with a word or two. They may also imitate others or repeat commonly used phrases such as greetings.

■ **Fluent second language use.** As children's second language vocabulary increases, they also begin to use correct English grammatical structures and begin to sound more like native speakers. Research indicates children take five to seven years to develop fluent academic second language skills (Thomas & Collier, 2002).