

Perceptions and Bias in Assessment Practices: Voices of Bilingual Educational Diagnosticians

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Abstract

This article examines how bilingual educational diagnosticians perceive and navigate linguistic and cultural bias in standardized assessment practices. Using qualitative interview data from two bilingual diagnosticians, the study highlights how lived bilingual experiences shape assessment decisions, interpretation of results, and advocacy for emergent bilingual students. Findings suggest that educational diagnostician preparation programs must strengthen and expand their focus on emergent bilingual assessment by intentionally integrating bilingual assessment training, culturally responsive evaluation frameworks, and supervised field experiences that emphasize equitable decision-making. The article also explores persistent sources of bias and challenges within current assessment practices and concludes with potential solutions to support more accurate, fair, and culturally responsive evaluation of emergent bilingual learners.

Keywords: *emergent bilingual, second language acquisition, assessments, linguistic, collaboration, consultation*

Standardized assessment practices in special education often fail to account for the linguistic and cultural realities of Emergent Bilingual (EB) students. While policies emphasize nondiscriminatory assessment, practitioners continue to navigate tools that were not normed on multilingual populations. This article explores the perceptions and experiences of two bilingual educational diagnosticians whose professional practice is informed by both formal training and lived bilingual assessment experiences.

Bilingual education has long been recognized as a critical framework for reducing linguistic barriers that impede the academic success of emergent bilingual students. This instructional approach delivers grade-level academic content in a student's native language (L1) while concurrently supporting the development of English proficiency (L2) (Barone & Cargile, 2020). By maintaining access to curriculum during language acquisition, bilingual education promotes educational equity and prevents Emergent Bilingual students from falling behind their English-only-speaking peers. At its core, bilingual education is grounded in principles of equal opportunity, access, and high-quality learning for all students, regardless of sex, age, gender, language background, or culture.

These same principles extend directly to assessment practices. When emergent bilingual students are evaluated exclusively in English, assessment outcomes may reflect language proficiency rather than true cognitive or academic ability. Consequently, evaluating students in their primary language is essential to ensuring valid and nondiscriminatory assessment results. This position is supported by longstanding legal precedent, including *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970) (Diana, 1970; Collings, 1973), which established that students must be assessed in their primary language whenever feasible to avoid linguistic bias in special education evaluations. Despite these mandates, practitioners continue to utilize assessment systems largely normed on monolingual English-speaking populations, raising ongoing concerns about equity and accuracy in evaluation practices.

Background

This gap between policy and practice underscores the importance of examining assessment through the perspectives of bilingual educational diagnosticians. This article centers on the voices of two bilingual educational diagnosticians who work directly with emergent bilingual students. Two practicing bilingual educational diagnosticians participated in semi-structured interviews focused on their experiences with assessment,

interpretation of standardized test results, and interactions with bilingual students and their families. Both participants are fluent in English and at least one additional language and have professional experience conducting special education evaluations in linguistically and culturally diverse school settings. Their dual perspectives as trained diagnosticians/professors teaching assessment courses and as bilingual individuals provide a critical lens for examining how language, culture, and bias intersect in assessment practices. By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, this study seeks to illuminate how bilingual diagnosticians navigate mandated assessment procedures while upholding principles of nondiscrimination. Their professional expertise, informed by lived bilingual experiences, offers critical insight into how linguistic and cultural biases manifest in assessment and how they may be mitigated in practice.

Methodology

A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was employed to explore the perceptions of two bilingual educational diagnosticians regarding bias and assessment practices. This design allowed participants to provide in-depth, reflective responses while maintaining flexibility for the interviewer to probe relevant experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Two bilingual educational diagnosticians participated in the study. Both have over a decade of experience conducting assessments with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Both participants are fluent in English; Participant 1's dominant language is Spanish, and Participant 2's dominant language is Hindi. Their extensive professional experience and bilingual backgrounds provided critical insight into how language, culture, and bias intersect in assessment practices. Individual interviews lasting 45-60 minutes were conducted with each participant. Written responses to the interview questions were collected and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and to provide examples of assessment practices, challenges, and strategies to mitigate bias.

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to bias, perception, advocacy, and decision-making in assessment (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Codes were organized into themes

to examine how bilingual diagnosticians navigate cultural and linguistic factors during assessment and how their bilingual experiences influence professional practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Interview

Participant 1 described how their experience as both a bilingual educator and a bilingual diagnostician has profoundly shaped their work with Emergent Bilingual students. They noted that simply knowing two languages is not sufficient to effectively serve this population, as their own early experiences gave them advantages that many immigrant children lack, including a strong foundation in their native language and well-developed literacy skills that facilitated learning English. Through formal preparation as bilingual educators, they learned how languages are acquired, how languages interact, and the instructional practices that best support second language development, which transformed their understanding of bilingual education. This expertise allows them, as diagnosticians, to interpret assessment data through a linguistic lens, distinguish language differences from disability and/or language proficiency, and advocate for equitable assessment practices.

Their knowledge of second language acquisition also informs how they identify and address language biases in testing, ensuring that difficulties in English are not misinterpreted as cognitive deficits and that assessments in both the student's native language and English are used when appropriate. Furthermore, their personal bilingual background has influenced their advocacy, motivating them to support students and families who may face systemic inequities or fear the assessment process. They described guiding families through evaluations, addressing misconceptions about bilingualism, and empowering parents to make informed decisions, while building trust and understanding, which may be absent due to cultural and linguistic differences. Overall, their bilingual identity and professional training allow them to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, promote accurate assessment, and ensure that emergent bilingual students are evaluated with fairness, depth, and respect.

Participant 2 described how their experience working with students whose dominant language is not English has strengthened both their assessment skills and their ability to communicate effectively with students and families. They emphasized the importance of being mindful of response time during testing, building trusting relationships, and explaining assessment results and reports in clear, accessible language rather than technical jargon. As a bilingual individual, they shared that their own experiences with language mixing (Alexiadou & Lohndal, 2018) in the United States has deepened their understanding of language development and acquisition. This perspective allows them to recognize how language, culture, and expectations influence student performance and to conduct culturally responsive and equitable assessments.

Their knowledge of second language acquisition helps them identify and address inherent language biases in standardized testing, such as the failure of many tests to account for limited English vocabulary, the overly technical language of test items, and the lack of normative data for multilingual populations. This awareness informs their interpretation of results and supports advocacy for a more holistic understanding of student abilities. Additionally, their bilingual background informs their advocacy work, particularly with families. In addition to their role as diagnostician, they volunteer in schools to support Hindi-speaking students, helping both students and parents understand the purpose of assessments, how results may influence educational opportunities, and the parents' rights in the process. They also work to build collaborative partnerships with families, emphasizing that assessment is a team effort and reassuring parents, especially those from Asian backgrounds, that advocating for their child is appropriate and encouraged, even if it involves questioning or declining parts of the process. Overall, their bilingual identity and professional experience enable them to support students and families effectively while promoting equitable and culturally informed assessment practices.

Results

Analysis of the interviews with two bilingual educational diagnosticians revealed four major themes regarding the assessment of emergent bilingual students: linguistic bias in standardized assessments, cultural expectations and

misinterpretation of student behavior, the influence of lived bilingual experience on assessment practices, and advocacy with families.

Theme 1: Linguistic Bias in Standardized Assessments

Both participants emphasized that language-heavy test formats are a primary source of bias, often leading to scores that reflect limited English proficiency rather than underlying cognitive deficits. Participant 1 noted that assessing students solely in English can lead to misidentification of learning disabilities and stressed the importance of evaluating students in both the native language (L1) and English (L2) to distinguish between language differences and disability (Wilden & Porsch, 2020). Participant 2 similarly highlighted that many standardized assessments do not account for limited English vocabulary, contain highly technical language, and are normed primarily on monolingual populations. Both participants emphasized that their understanding of second language acquisition allows them to interpret results cautiously, avoiding misrepresentation of students' true abilities.

Theme 2: Cultural Expectations and Misinterpretation of Student Behavior

Participants described how culturally influenced behaviors, such as response time, eye contact, and interaction patterns, can be misinterpreted as noncompliance or deficits (Ashikuzzaman, 2023). Participant 1 reflected on the ways students' cultural backgrounds may shape classroom participation and how educators' low expectations can undermine students' potential (Center on PBIS -Positive Behavior and Supports, 2025). Participant 2 emphasized that awareness of cultural context enables them to interpret student behavior appropriately and prevents misreading culturally normative responses as academic or behavioral issues.

Theme 3: Influence of Lived Bilingual Experience on Assessment Practices

Both diagnosticians reported that their personal bilingual experiences inform their professional practice. Participant 1 discussed how their bilingual identity and native-language literacy enhanced their understanding of language transfer and second-language acquisition. Participant 2 described how experiencing language mixing and code-switching

strengthened empathy for students and increased sensitivity to response time, fatigue, and the linguistic demands of assessment tasks (Kufakunesu & Thandiswa Mpiti, 2025). These real-time experiences enabled both diagnosticians to adopt nuanced, culturally responsive approaches, particularly when interpreting verbal scores.

Theme 4: Advocacy with Families

Advocacy emerged as a central theme for both participants. Participant 1 described stepping into the role of advocate for bilingual students and families, helping parents navigate the special education process, understand their rights, and feel empowered to participate in decision-making (Murphy & Tucker, 2025). Participant 2 similarly emphasized building trusting relationships with families, providing clear explanations, and reassuring parents, particularly those from Asian backgrounds, that advocating for their child is both appropriate and encouraged. Both participants stressed the importance of family-centered, culturally responsive communication and the role of the bilingual practitioner as a bridge between the student, family, and school system.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that bilingual diagnosticians leverage both professional training and their experience working with bilingual students to mitigate linguistic and cultural biases, conduct equitable assessments, and advocate effectively for emergent bilingual students and their families.

Problems and Biases with Current Assessment Practices

Significant challenges exist within current methods used to diagnose language deficiencies and/or learning disabilities among students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. To ensure impartial, accurate assessment outcomes and appropriate identification of disabilities, evaluators must attend carefully to the cultural and linguistic context of the student being assessed. While standardized assessments are designed to provide consistency, they often fail to account for the wide variability in students' cultural experiences, linguistic exposure, and educational opportunities (Bach, 2020). As a result, the use of standardized, norm-referenced assessments with culturally and linguistically diverse

students frequently raises concerns regarding both validity and reliability.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” assessment tool. When evaluators rely heavily on standardized norm-referenced measures, they may unintentionally misinterpret differences in language, culture, or experience as cognitive deficits. These challenges are particularly pronounced for students who have immigrated to the United States and whose early experiences may have prioritized survival over formal education (Manspile et al, 2021). Limited exposure to literacy, numeracy, or structured schooling prior to immigration can significantly influence test performance, yet such contextual factors are rarely captured by standardized assessments. This is particularly noted when evaluating students who come from countries whose dominant language is Spanish versus those from Asian cultures (Ortiz, & Wong, 2020).

Three primary sources of bias undermine the validity and reliability of English-only norm-referenced assessments for culturally and linguistically diverse students: content bias, linguistic bias, and inadequate representation within normative samples.

1: *Content bias* arises when test items assume shared cultural knowledge or experiences that may not be universally familiar (Myers, 2023). Students from different cultural backgrounds may not have been exposed to the same concepts, symbols, or social practices embedded within test materials. For example, some cultures discourage behaviors such as pointing, which is a common response format in early childhood assessments when testing American students. When students are asked to perform culturally incongruent tasks, their performance may reflect unfamiliarity with the task rather than a true limitation in ability. Additionally, familial and cultural values such as a strong emphasis on collective responsibility over individual academic achievement may influence students' prior educational experiences without indicating a lack of learning potential.

2: *Linguistic bias* presents another significant challenge. Many languages, particularly Asian languages, include multiple dialects that vary across regions and communities (Ebert et al., 2025). Even when an assessor speaks the

student's language, differences in dialect, pronunciation, or syntax can affect comprehension and responses. Variations in accent or dialectal usage may be misinterpreted as language impairment or articulation errors, when in fact they represent normal linguistic variation. Thus, apparent deficits in expressive or receptive language may reflect dialectal differences rather than true impairment (Prezas, 2017). Standardized tests that measure phonological awareness skills can become challenging when a child has learned whole word reading (aka as sight word reading) and not reading using sounds (i.e., phonological processing).

3: *Limited and unrepresentative normative samples* used to develop standardized assessments. Culturally and linguistically diverse students are often underrepresented in norming populations, which can make the resulting scores less meaningful and potentially misleading (Gary et al., 2023). Even when students from similar linguistic or cultural backgrounds are included, issues of overidentification or underidentification of disabilities may persist. Although ongoing efforts aim to improve assessment equity, these limitations continue to challenge the fair evaluation of bilingual students.

Solutions

While developing culturally specific standardized assessments for every population is not feasible, alternative approaches can mitigate many of the biases inherent in norm-referenced testing. One such approach is the use of criterion-referenced assessments, which evaluate specific cognitive skills against clearly defined performance criteria rather than comparisons with a normative group (Thompson, 2025). Criterion-referenced measures focus on what a student can do and how they perform targeted tasks, allowing evaluators to consider linguistic structure, dialectal variation, and cultural context. When thoughtfully designed, these assessments can reduce both content and linguistic bias (Laing, 2003). However, their effectiveness depends heavily on the assessor's cultural competence and understanding of the student's background. How assessors develop cultural competence is discussed below.

Laing (2003) emphasizes that traditional, standardized assessments often fail to capture the true language and literacy abilities of culturally and linguistically diverse

bilingual students because these measures rely heavily on prior exposure to English vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Instead, Laing (2003) highlights the value of processing-dependent measures, which focus on how students learn, recall, and manipulate language rather than what they already know. These approaches reduce cultural and linguistic bias by examining underlying cognitive-linguistic skills such as memory, phonological processing, and learning efficiency.

Additionally, Laing (2003) promotes the use of dynamic assessment, an interactive evaluation method that incorporates teaching, feedback, and graduated support during the assessment process. Dynamic assessment helps distinguish between a true language or learning disability and differences related to second-language acquisition or limited educational opportunity. By observing how quickly and effectively a student responds to instruction, evaluators gain a more equitable and valid understanding of the learner's potential.

Overall, Laing (2003) argues that combining processing-focused tasks with dynamic, responsive assessment practices leads to fairer identification and more appropriate educational planning for bilingual students. These approaches are grounded in Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes the difference between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Dynamic assessment aligns with this framework by identifying both current functioning and emerging skills, offering a more comprehensive understanding of a student's abilities and instructional needs.

Discussion

Increasing assessors' understanding of a child's family or cultural values, customs, migration experiences, linguistic proficiency, and level of acculturation can significantly enhance the effectiveness of assessments. Educators have a professional duty to act in the best interest of all students, ensuring that assessments used are both valid and reliable, particularly for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This article highlights the benefits of dual-language development and examines structural

differences between English and students' primary languages. In addition, it provides a brief overview of different cultural values, emphasizing how knowledge of these differences can inform teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Awareness of culturally specific do's and don'ts can profoundly shape the development of trust and rapport between students, educators, and parents, underscoring the importance of cultural competence in any educational setting.

Methodologies for assessment were also discussed, including strategies for understanding language acquisition, challenges associated with existing norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments, and proposals for alternative approaches. When resources for formal assessments are limited, conducting family interviews with the support of a translator or interpreter can help reduce cultural and linguistic bias (Freeman & Schroeder, 2022). Whenever possible, assessments should use the student's primary language to accurately assess conversational proficiency (including receptive and expressive language). The findings suggest that bilingual diagnosticians are uniquely positioned to identify and mitigate assessment bias due to their linguistic awareness and cultural competence. Bilingual diagnosticians bring unique interpretive insight as bias is not just in tests, but in how results are interpreted, and practitioner flexibility is essential for ethical assessment.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational practice. First, there is a clear need for assessment training that is informed by bilingual and culturally responsive approaches. Educators and diagnosticians must be equipped to recognize linguistic and cultural biases in standardized testing and to adapt assessment procedures accordingly. Second, the use of qualitative data and multiple assessment measures is critical to obtain a holistic understanding of students' abilities, particularly for those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Finally, communication with families should be family-centered and culturally responsive, ensuring that parents are actively engaged in the assessment process, understand the purpose and

outcomes of testing, and feel empowered to advocate for their children.

Educational diagnostician preparation programs must intentionally integrate assessment practices that equip bilingual diagnosticians to evaluate culturally and linguistically diverse students with accuracy and equity. Coursework and field experiences should emphasize nondiscriminatory assessment procedures, including the use of multiple data sources, language proficiency measures, dynamic assessment, and processing-dependent tasks that reduce linguistic bias. Candidates should also develop skills in collaboration with families, interpreters, and multidisciplinary teams to ensure that evaluation findings reflect students' true abilities rather than language differences. Embedding these competencies within preparation programs strengthens ethical decision-making, improves eligibility determinations, and promotes more effective, culturally responsive educational planning for emergent bilingual learners.

Conclusion

These interviews underscore the value of bilingual practitioners' voices in identifying and mitigating bias in assessment practices. Bilingual diagnosticians bring unique insights that enhance the validity and fairness of evaluations for emergent bilingual students. At a systemic level, this study highlights the need for continued reform in assessment practices to ensure equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Finally, the findings point to the necessity of further research with larger samples of bilingual diagnosticians to expand understanding of how bilingual experience influences assessment and to develop best practices for culturally and linguistically responsive evaluation (Frierson et al., 2002).

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