# Literacy Assessment for English Language Learners

Developmentally-appropriate assessment is a vital component of literacy instruction for children at all stages of reading and writing development. The information gleaned from such assessment allows teachers to plan instruction that targets children's specific literacy needs and identify those who may need additional instruction in order to become successful readers. Having access to effective, research-based literacy assessment is particularly important for English language learners (ELLs), who are more likely than their native English speaking peers to experience difficulty learning to read in English, a gap that tends to widen the longer children are in school (Office of English Language Acquisition, 2015).

## Language of Assessment

Research has shown that literacy assessment administered in English can be used effectively with ELLs who have attained at least a minimal level of English proficiency (Ford, Cabell, Konold, Invernizzi, & Gartland, 2013; Ford, Invernizzi, & Huang, 2014); however, assessing bilingual children in both their languages always provides a more complete picture of their language and literacy development (Cofresi & Gorman, 2004; Peña & Halle, 2011). Bilingual children typically develop literacy skills at different rates in their two languages, even when receiving bilingual instruction, making it difficult to understand their overall literacy development if they are assessed in only one language. Recent research with Spanish/English bilingual children (Solari et al., 2014) further suggests that the early language and literacy skills that predict later English reading achievement may actually be different in L1 than in English, which could have implications for identifying children at risk for developing reading difficulties.

Information about children's L1 literacy development can inform literacy instruction, even when that instruction is exclusively in English. Many literacy skills tend to transfer between languages (Durgunoglu, 2002; Gottardo, 2002; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003), so determining which skills have been developed in L1 makes it possible for teachers to build on those skills to help a child learn to read in English. For example, if a child already has the ability to blend phonemes into words in L1, there is no point in spending valuable instructional time in re-teaching the concept of phonemic blending in English.

Providing assessment in L1 can also help distinguish between language proficiency issues and literacy issues when children are having problems with English reading. If assessment in a child's L1 reveals appropriate literacy development, then any problems the child is experiencing with learning to read in English are likely the result of lack of English oral proficiency and not related to essential literacy skills (Durgunoglu, 2002).

Whether assessment is administered in English or in the child's L1, several important factors should be kept in mind when interpreting outcomes:

- Language dominance may shift as children learn a second language, making it difficult to know which is a child's stronger language at any given time.
- Bilingual children typically use their two languages in different environments, and they develop vocabulary in each language based on the demands of that particular language

environment. For example, a child may know vocabulary related to the home environment only in L1 but may know school-related vocabulary only in English.

- Translating an assessment can affect its psychometric properties, including content and construct validity.
- Unless care is taken to ensure that L1 assessments are culturally and linguistically neutral, they can advantage some speakers of a language over others (e.g., Spanish speakers of Mexican heritage over those of Cuban heritage).
- Bilingual children's L1 language development may be different than that of monolingual L1 speakers.

**Literacy Assessment for ELLs in Virginia**

Children in Grades K-3 in public schools across Virginia receive literacy screening each year as part of the Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI). The EIRI was established by Virginia's General Assembly for the purpose of identifying students in need of early intervention in order to reduce the number of students with persistent reading problems. The initiative funds assessment materials for participating Virginia public school divisions to provide literacy screening for all children in Grades K-3 and requires that students who do not meet assessment benchmarks, including ELLs, receive two and one-half hours of additional literacy instruction each week.

At this time, the Virginia Department of Education, which administers the EIRI, requires that assessment for the initiative be conducted in English for all students; however, administrators of individual school divisions can determine whether all or only some of their ELLs participate in EIRI assessment. School divisions are also free to conduct additional literacy assessment in ELL students' L1.

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