FACT # 1: Practitioners conducting diagnostic assessments need to have a clear understanding of the dual language learning process in young children in order to make accurate determinations. It is very challenging to determine whether or not children who are dual language learners are demonstrating the normal variances associated with second language learning or are exhibiting symptoms related to inherent language difficulties. However, without adequate understanding of the language acquisition process in young dual language learners it is impossible to make that determination. That is because certain characteristics associated with language learning in dual language learners and monolingual learners with language impairments overlap—especially those related to morphosyntactic skills, language processing, and vocabulary development (Paradis, et al, 2011; Windsor & Kohnert, 2004). Staff involved in evaluating young dual language learners need to know where children are in the language acquisition process as well as what that process looks like in order to accurately analyze any information and data gathered about the children (Castro, et al, 2011; Espinosa, 2010). At the same time, staff needs to understand what happens to children’s home language development as they acquire English, especially when they are receiving services only in English or are enrolled in predominantly English-speaking programs, in order to accurately interpret children’s home language development.

FACT #2: It is essential to assess young dual language learners in all of their languages as well as consider their cultural backgrounds when determining whether or not they qualify for special education services (Espinosa, 2010; Frede & Garcia, 2010; Paradis, et al, 2011). Children who are learning in more than one language often store learned concepts in different languages—depending on how, where, and in what language the knowledge was acquired. So evaluating children who are dual language learners in only one language, even if it is their dominant language, will not provide a complete or accurate picture of their total skill level in social-emotional, motor, cognitive, and overall language development (Castro, et al, 2011; Espinosa, 2010; Paradis, 2011). The only way to make sure that evaluators are assessing what children actually know and can do is to gather authentic information in all of their languages across multiple environments. It is important to remember that language and culture are intimately intertwined. This means that the information and skills children acquire within the context of their home, community, and early childhood program is influenced not only by the language in which it is learned, but also by the cultural context in which the learning takes place. This interplay between language and culture has profound implications for interpreting children’s performance on standardized assessment instruments which are usually biased toward monolingual, middle-class white children (Castro, et al, 2011; Paradis, et al, 2011). (See Facts & Tips # 5.4 for more information.)

FACT #3: Gathering information about the quantity and quality of input in both languages is critical when determining “language difference” vs. language impairment. Children who are dual language learners will often fluctuate in their home language skills as they acquire English. In other words, their home language development may look delayed when compared to monolingual speakers of their home language for various reasons as they begin learning and decoding the new language. Children who are dual language learners often experience language attrition, or language loss, in their home language as they acquire English especially if they are receiving services in English only or are enrolled in predominantly English-speaking early childhood programs (Espinosa, 2008; Paradis, et al, 2011). In addition, young dual language learners who come from families of low socio-economic means may not be receiving the quantity and quality of language input in their home language that is necessary for age-appropriate language skills (Bardige & Bardige, 2008; Espinosa, 2010). All of these factors are important to examine and consider when assessing young dual language learners. Finally, it is important to determine whether or not young dual language learners are receiving adequate language scaffolding in English in the early childhood program in which they are enrolled. Inadequate English language supports and home language supports in the early care environment may negatively impact children’s acquisition of English and home language development.
Tips Related to Diagnostic Assessment

- Programs might consider the professional development needs of practitioners and/or evaluators in their programs who are charged with assessing young dual language learners in order to determine eligibility for special education. Do practitioners and/or evaluators understand the language acquisition process in young dual language learners? Do they understand the differences between languages when evaluating children for speech/language impairments? Do they understand underlying cultural differences when interpreting children’s performance on developmental milestones? If not, programs might consider accessing professional development on these topics as well as providing their staff with technical assistance from others who are knowledgeable in the area of dual or multiple language acquisition in children, birth-5 years.

- Include someone on the evaluation team who is familiar with second language acquisition in young children to help evaluators analyze children’s responses or performance during observations and/or formal testing. If there is not someone available to help during the evaluation process, consider consulting with someone before and after conducting the assessments to help analyze findings in terms of second language learning.

- Carefully plan how your team will gather authentic assessment information in the children’s home language across multiple environments. Consider using interpreters and information from parents and primary caregivers as an integral part of the evaluation process.

- Make sure to include information regarding “quantity and quality” of input in all languages. Are adequate and appropriate language supports and scaffolding in English available if the children being assessed are enrolled in early childhood programs or are receiving services predominantly in English? Is the program’s curriculum and on-going assessment tools culturally and linguistically relevant to the children being assessed? If not, how might that have affected the children’s English language development? Does the program offer home language support? If so, is it frequent and systematic? If not, have the children begun to lose their home language skills as they acquire English? What is the quantity and quality of home language input in the children’s home environment? Do parents know the importance of talking and interacting with their children in the home language? These are all important factors to consider when analyzing children’s English and home language development.

Connecting with Families

- Inform parents of their central role in the evaluation process of their child. Make sure that an interpreter is present to assist families in sharing important information about their child. An interpreter can also help bridge any cultural gaps or misunderstandings during the assessment. Be prepared for evaluations of young dual language learners to take more time due to linguistic and cultural differences that need to be discovered and bridged. Some cultures frown on sharing more “intimate” details of their families' lives with strangers and so relationship building will be even more important. In other cultures, teachers and educational professionals are viewed as the “experts” and parents do not believe that their knowledge of their child is important or significant to the assessment process.

- It is imperative to gather an extensive language history from parents and primary caregivers for all languages and language environments the child has experienced since birth. It is important to remember that English may be the children’s third language. This is often common for children from Mexico or African countries where the home language may be indigenous or tribal and the “public” language Spanish or French. Detailed language information is critical for discerning language difference vs. language impairment in young dual language learners. Essential information to gather includes:
  - Languages spoken by parents and primary caregivers of the child since birth. Has this changed over time? How and for how long?
  - Languages spoken by siblings to the child.
  - When and how child was first exposed to English (simultaneous vs. sequential). Has child received consistent and regular input in English? For how long? Has exposure to English been incidental (t.v., going to parks, stores, etc.) or from direct interactions with caregivers, siblings, relatives, neighbors, or other important and consistent individuals?
  - How child responds to parents, caregivers, siblings, relatives, or teacher (in which language) in each language environment. Gather examples of child responses.
  - Language samples of all languages in different environments.

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References and Resources


