

Culturally Relevant Speech-Language Practices for Second Language Learners

Tina Ta
Andrea Liendo

Professionals working in language education must take up culturally relevant practices when working with culturally and linguistically diverse children. As Espinosa (2005) states, “[c]ulture influences both how children approach learning and how they are socialized into becoming language users and literate” (p. 839). Children may experience a disconnect between their cultural and school identities when educators fail to value their home and community experiences; this can lead to their forming negative views about themselves as language learners (Garcia, 1993 as cited in Espinosa, 2005). Furthermore, when professionals fail to take children’s culture into account and rely solely on standardized assessment tools to assess their language abilities, they may mislabel children as being deficient and lacking (Hoover et al., 2018).

Speech-Language Pathologists (S-LPs), a group of professionals who work closely with children, focus on children’s language development. It is therefore necessary that these professionals understand and take up culturally relevant practices when working with culturally and linguistically diverse children. Because of the lack of research on such practices in the field of speech-language pathology, in this paper, we draw upon research in teaching and pedagogy to delineate key aspects of culturally relevant speech-language assessment and programming practices.

Culturally Relevant Assessment

Speech and language assessments are often normed with monolingual native speakers. As such, they may not provide an accurate measure

or complete picture of the cognitive and academic abilities of bilingual learners (Herzog-Punzenberger, et al., 2020; Hoover et al., 2018; Hue & Kennedy, 2015; Paradis et al., 2013). Cultural bias may exist within the checklists, rating scales, and writing exemplars that make up assessments (Espinosa, 2005). Speech-Language Pathologists should question whether their language assessment tools are culturally sensitive and if they are using them in ways that are culturally appropriate and free from bias (Agbenyega, 2009; Hue & Kennedy, 2015). To ethically and fairly address these issues, professionals should avoid relying on one assessment tool and commit to carrying out frequent assessments. Their goal should be to gather data from multiple sources over time and in settings that reflect and respond to authentic student learning (Espinosa, 2005; Hoover et al., 2008; Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018).

In addition, since bilingual children typically progress faster in one language, in order to attain an accurate understanding of children’s language skills, S-LPs should assess their home language in addition to their English (Espinosa, 2009; Moore, 2020). It is critical that S-LPs invite the child’s family to share observations of their oral language proficiency and communication when speaking their home language. Furthermore, Espinosa (2005) suggests S-LPs include a native language speaker as part of the assessment team.

In reviewing assessment evidence, S-LPs should strive for the highest degree of objectivity, and they may do this effectively using the *Confirming-Disconfirming Process* (Hoover et al., 2018). A key element of this process requires

professionals to purposely work against their confirmatory bias, a bias which will inevitably lead to their seeking out or focusing on information that confirms their preconceived notions about the child. Instead, they are encouraged to pay close attention to information that directly contradicts their expected conclusion (Hoover et al., 2018). Most importantly, when interpreting the results of language assessments, rather than assuming internal factors, professionals should examine those external factors that may have influenced the child's assessment results. Once they have gathered confirming and disconfirming information, professionals should come together to discuss the assessment results and ensure their future planning is culturally responsive (Hoover et al., 2018). Since S-LPs work within structures that can be limiting and embedded with biases, they must continually engage in personal reflection and discussions with others regarding the influence on their practice of standardization and mandated policies that exclude diverse learners.

Culturally Relevant Programming

It is not enough for S-LPs to understand how young children acquire language; they must also have a firm understanding of second language development, as bilingualism may affect the rate of vocabulary development in culturally diverse children (Espinosa, 2005). Several studies point to the need for professionals who work with culturally and linguistically diverse children to enhance their understanding of the differences between a language disorder and second language acquisition (Edyburn et al., 2019; Espinosa, 2005; Hoover et al., 2018). An S-LP's knowledge of second language development may encourage them to use a child's home language as the foundation upon which to enrich their English language learning and may prevent them from making incorrect judgements, especially when using assessment tools (Ball, 2014; Espinosa, 2005; Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018; Hue & Kennedy, 2015). Quality professional development opportunities can assist S-LPs in applying second language theoretical knowledge into practice.

It is vital that culturally and linguistically diverse language assessment be connected to and integrated with aspects of children's classroom lives, creating what Hue and Kennedy (2015) call a "yin-yang flow". Speech-Language Pathologists can work in concert with classroom teachers to support their students' language learning. For example, teachers can introduce children to explicit vocabulary through classroom activities. Through modeling and by teaching communication strategies (e.g., those that support complex oral language development), S-LPs can then extend the children's learning in small group or one-on-one settings (Edyburn et al., 2019). They can also post sentence stems and create word walls in their work spaces (Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018).

Small group interactions provide linguistically diverse children with opportunities to showcase their unique talents and, through their engagement with peers, to learn critical language skills. Within these contexts, teachers and S-LPs can afford children increased wait times and extend to them explicit invitations for participation (Espinosa, 2005). Hue and Kennedy (2015) suggest that, by grouping students based on language diversity, teachers and S-LPs can manage the range of linguistic diversity, making it easier and more effective for them to teach and fulfill their students' language needs.

Finally, S-LPs should encourage linguistically diverse children to make connections to their previous knowledge (Hoover & Soltero-González, 2018). For example, to enhance vocabulary and develop a deeper understanding of complex ideas and concepts, S-LPs should encourage children to use their native language (Edyburn et al., 2019). Ball (2010) posits that children are more likely to feel valued and represented in the learning when they learn in their mother tongue. Moreover, they are more likely to succeed when their mother tongue is used as a foundation for language learning.

Conclusion

To avoid the risk of identifying culturally and linguistically diverse children as deficit language

learners or special education students, S-LPs need to take up culturally relevant practices when assessing and programming for these children. Culturally relevant language learning and assessment programs should be conceived as multi-tiered systems that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of children. It is critical that S-LPs continually engage in professional learning that encourages them to examine their cultural biases, not only when using standardized oral assessment tools, but also in speech-language practices that may ignore the rich cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children. Speech-Language Pathologists must work with families to promote the mother tongue language as a foundational tool upon which to build and scaffold young children's language learning. They must also work in collaboration with teachers to create learning environments that reflect their students' cultural backgrounds and value and respect their mother tongues.

Author Biographies

Tina Ta is a graduate student in the Ph.D program in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

Andrea Liendo is a retired teacher who has recently completed her Ph.D in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto.

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