

Dynamic Assessment: An Alternative for Diagnostic and Early Intervention Services

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It has long been understood, albeit through a Eurocentric lens, that oral language plays a vital role in children's overall development (Ball, 2007). Oral language proficiency has been strongly linked to students' overall success in all developmental domains and is said to contribute to the likelihood of students continuing formal school (Hart Blundon & Risley, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research suggests early intervention for students displaying language delays can significantly increase students' likelihood of school success, participation in the work-force, economic security, and social inclusion (Eriks-Brophy, 2014). However, the over-representation of Indigenous children with language delays has called into question the use of Eurocentric approaches and tools for the assessment of Indigenous children's development.

This paper is particularly relevant to over 50 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities where children often enter formal school – ones that are predominantly taught in English – fluent in their home language(s) and with limited exposure to English (Eriks-Brophy, 2014; SAC, 2010). These circumstances echo some of my personal experiences regarding the profound cultural mismatch I found between my home and schools. Like many minority groups (Hibel et al., 2008), I was erroneously placed in Special Education Needs classes due to such cultural mismatch.

Indeed, I do not have Indigenous ancestry; thus, do not have the ancestral knowledge to critically discern what is or is not culturally and linguistically appropriate for any one Indigenous

community. I am, as some (e.g., Kay-Raining Bird, 2014) would refer to as, a descendent of Gaa-bi-digoshjig (an Ojibway phrase for “settlers” that directly translates to: those that arrived), as I arrived in Canada as a refugee during the Iran-Iraq war. However, I am also a member of the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour) community and have experienced first-hand systems of oppression that personally connect me, in some ways, to the plight of visible minority equity groups, including Indigenous peoples. Though, I do not claim to have the same experiences. I offer my positionality here since, “locating oneself in relation to everything one does is one of the key foundational principles in Indigenous research contexts” (Styres, 2017, p. 7) and is the only place I can write with any degree of certainty.

I begin this paper by identifying issues from my review of the literature on speech-language assessment tools and services for Indigenous children, particularly First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations. Then, similar to Ta and Liendo (2021), I summarize cultural and linguistic approaches to address these issues. I then make the case for using a process-oriented speech-language assessment approach, *dynamic assessment*, to help professionals distinguish differences from deficits.

Issues

A small portion of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis population in northern Canada have access to child-care programs where children's speech-language development can be monitored and

difficulties noted (Ball, 2007). Additionally, the existing monitoring, screening, or diagnostic tools professionals use to assess Indigenous children's oral language have predominantly been normed on monolingual children of European heritage in urban settings, meaning they reflect concepts, perspectives, and values that do not represent northern Indigenous children (Dench et al., 2011; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Peltier, 2011; Peterson et al., 2021). This fact alone has largely contributed to both the cultural and linguistic loss of Indigenous people today.

Traditional speech-language assessment approaches are also inherently biased as they often only assess a student's acquired knowledge or production rather than their ability to learn (Dench et al., 2011; Kramer et al, 2009), leading to the underestimation and, thus, inaccurate judgements of their abilities (Dench et al., 2011; Hibel et al., 2008). This is particularly concerning since students are often at different starting points upon entering formal school, which is, more often than not, penalized through assessment, as opposed to being celebrated.

Equally as important, most speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) in Canada are non-Indigenous and have limited to no experience working with First Nation, Inuit, and Métis populations (Peltier, 2011). Thus, the diagnostic and intervention services clinicians provide to these groups of children are often biased (Eriks-Brophy, 2014), leading to an over-representation of Indigenous children with developmental challenges and the "undermining of culture-driven goals for development, . . . [including] failure to support Indigenous children's learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate within the cultural contexts of Indigenous children's socialization" (Ball & Lewis, 2011, p. 146). A vast majority of Indigenous children who have been socialized to use silence, for instance, to show respect or as a predominant form of learning through listening, observing, and doing in lieu of verbal explanations and oral participation - the latter being more highly valued in Western schools - have historically been, and may unintentionally continue to be, viewed from a deficit perspective (Ball & Lewis, 2005).

Solutions

The development of culturally and linguistically appropriate diagnostic and early intervention tools for Indigenous children can both support clinicians in taking up an asset perspective and support Indigenous language and cultural preservation initiatives (Dench et al., 2011). This requires, but is not limited to, speech-language pathologists' awareness of: children's language socialization practices and preferred learning style(s); historical factors that impact current community members' dispositions toward Western approaches; and sources of probable bias relevant to either the speech-language assessment process or pathology (Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Ball, 2009; Peltier, 2011; SAC, 2021).

Partnering with communities can help establish content validity for assessments (Dench et al., 2011) and increase clinicians' awareness of cultural and linguistic variations within and across Indigenous communities, which can ultimately heighten their awareness of potential biases in prevention, diagnostic, and early intervention services for Indigenous youth (Ball & Lewis, 2014; Peltier, 2011). However, building deep relationships with the community as well as placing community members as cultural informants must be at the forefront (Dench et al., 2011; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Peltier, 2011). Without community partnerships, information gathered about Indigenous children from assessments may reflect their degree of acculturation as opposed to their level of functioning (Eriks-Brophy, 2014).

Culturally & Linguistically Sensitive Assessments

Recently, there has been movement toward process-oriented speech-language assessment approaches that help speech-language pathologists distinguish deficits from differences. These approaches measure students' acquired knowledge and skills as well as their ability to learn (Kramer et al, 2009). However, even process-oriented approaches must be locally developed (Dench et al., 2011).

Dynamic assessment, a process-driven approach that involves a test-teach-retest format (Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Kramer et al, 2009) and assesses children's "use of learning strategies, responsiveness to instruction, modifiability, and ability to generalize newly learned skills to novel situations" (Eriks-Brophy, 2014, p. 163), appreciates that every child enters formal school with different cultural and linguistic experiences and, in turn, have unique strengths and gifts to be honed. This worldview is in line with that of Sharla Peltier (2011), a certified S-LP and member of the Loon Clan, Chippewas of Rama Mnjikaning First Nation, Ontario.

Making the Case for Dynamic Assessment

Documented concerns about standardized speech-language assessments misidentifying and misdiagnosing Indigenous children with developmental challenges (Ball, 2009; SAC, 2010), has led me to provide a rationale for the use of more process-oriented approaches, such as dynamic assessment, as it has the potential to discern language deficits from differences and is, thus, a culturally and linguistically sensitive alternative for diagnostic and early intervention services in both rural and urban communities.

I believe that, when the desired outcome of the local community is to stimulate young children's language development, dynamic assessment has the potential to provide useful information to all education stakeholders, as it affords professionals the opportunity to identify children who may benefit from early speech-language intervention, but not require full S-LP services (Krammer et al., 2009; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Peterson et al., 2021). When guided by the local community, dynamic assessment also has the potential to provide a viable framework for culturally and linguistically sensitive diagnostic and early intervention services (Eriks-Brophy, 2014). For instance, S-LPs, may be encouraged to support children's awareness and ability to purposefully code-switch in the "teach" phase of the speech-language assessment (Peltier, 2011) and/or to use oral storytelling as a culturally responsive context for assessment (Kramer et al, 2009), where

stories told are novel to the listener (Dench et al., 2011).

Conclusion

As we have noted elsewhere (Peterson et al., 2021), it is imperative we move beyond simply making do with currently available, yet culturally biased, assessment and intervention tools (Peltier, 2011) that continue to negatively impact Indigenous communities and perpetuate stereotyping and stigma (Tabachnik & Bloch, 1995). In so doing, we must continue to recognize that holding a specific standard as "correct" is, in fact, a continued form of colonial assimilationism and linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997; Sterzuk, 2011) that Indigenous people have had to face and/or resist for far too long. An altogether different approach for assessment and diagnostic services can better support Indigenous cultural and linguistic preservation as well as revitalization efforts (Ball & Lewis, 2011).

Further empirical research and critical meta-analyses of existing research is needed to explore more fully Indigenous children's speech-language development, needs, and responses to interventions, particularly those that are deemed culturally and linguistically appropriate by individual communities (Ball, 2007; Hart Blundon, 2016; Peltier, 2011; Peterson et al., 2021). No matter the approach, it must be in line with the worldviews of individual communities, such as appreciating the strengths of each child and nourishing their gifts (Peltier, 2011). Expanding our knowledge and continually engaging in dialogue with Indigenous populations will better position us - non-Indigenous people - as partners in developing resources and tools that are culturally and linguistically responsive for specific communities (Pesco, 2014).

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Author Biography

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