

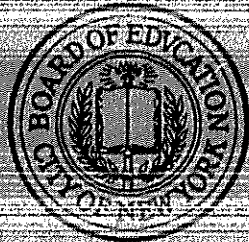
CONFIDENTIAL

TEST RESOURCE GUIDE

VOLUME V

COMMUNICATION/LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT
and
TESTS OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

1997 Edition



BOARD OF EDUCATION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

Volume V, Communication/Language Assessment and Tests of Language Proficiency, consists of reviews of standardized tests that are intended to measure communication and language skills. In addition to assessing communication and language usage in English, tests of English proficiency, language dominance, and proficiency in languages other than English are included. Language scales that are part of daily living or adaptive behavior scales are reviewed in other volumes.

ORGANIZATION OF VOLUME V COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

The tests reviewed in this volume are arranged in alphabetical order. They are limited to those which measure oral/aural and written language development. Tests that are deemed to assess school achievement, learned content in the areas of reading and language arts in both English and other languages, are reviewed in Volume IV, Assessment of School Achievement.

Each test review consists of the author's statement of the purpose of the test, a description of the instrument including administration and scoring, a review of its psychometric properties, and a section entitled Special Alerts/Comments in which the assessment professional is advised of the appropriateness of the test for special populations and the use of resulting test scores. Most of the comments in this section reflect the experience of New York City assessment professionals who have reviewed and used many of these instruments.

Inclusion in the *Test Resource Guide* does not signify approval. A review simply means that a test specialist and assessment professional have evaluated the test. Users of the *Guide* should read the entire review focusing on the Special Alerts Section which provides information on recommended uses of the test. Tests in the *Guide* should be used consistent with guidelines in the Special Alerts/Comments section. Tests that are not in the *Guide* should be used consistent with the Manual and interpreted with care. Note that information about these tests should be sent to the Office of Special Education Clinical Services as per updating instructions in the Appendix.

TESTING IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Communication and language are prerequisites to learning and are essential skills in daily living. Without receptive and expressive language skills, a student's ability to function in society is severely limited. Unless there is adequate language development, a student cannot take advantage of the opportunities for learning that are available in the school system.

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Function of Communication and Language Assessment.

Communication and language measures are used to determine a student's functional levels, plan interventions when necessary, and evaluate progress. The type of test selected is dependent upon the purpose of testing and the reason for referral. Tests are generally designed for specific purposes and rarely is one test suitable for all purposes. It is the assessment professional's responsibility to select instruments that will meet the goals of the assessment process.

Generally, communication and language assessment have the following functions (Secord, Wiig, Damico, & Goodin, 1994):

- (1) differentiation of students, if necessary, into diagnostic categories for placement purposes;
- (2) determination of the reasons for a student's inability to be a "proficient communicator";
- (3) determination of a student's communicative strengths and weaknesses and the underlying causes of any identified weaknesses;
- (4) effective planning and implementation of interventions, when needed;
- (5) documenting behaviors.

Both communication and linguistic competencies are assessed. Communication competence is assessed through the evaluation of a student's receptive and expressive language skills. Prerequisite to this assessment, it is essential to determine the adequacy of the student's hearing and oral-motor proficiency. The basic questions are: Does the student comprehend? Does the student express himself/herself so that others understand him/her? The major focus is on communication. Reading and writing are other examples of receptive and expressive language. The assessment professional may consider student ability in reading and writing in the assessment report.

Assessment of receptive and expressive linguistic competence necessitates investigating the student's abilities in phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics (Bashir, 1989). Each of these areas along with articulation, fluency, and voice is important in determining the language development of an individual student.

Communication and Language Assessment Instruments

A variety of tools and procedures are available to the assessment professional. Kamhi (1994) has indicated that we use many different approaches to assess student communication and language skills primarily because there is a lack of commitment to a specific theory or paradigm upon which a particular instrument or procedure is based. There are two primary paths to assessment in this area: standardized testing and descriptive assessment.

Standardized tests. Both norm referenced (NRT) and criterion referenced (CRT) tests are used in language assessment. These tests differ in the way they report results. NRTs compare students with each other in relation to communicative and linguistic competencies so that test information reveals the student's standing in the group. CRTs indicate how much the student knows or is able to perform with reference to developmental milestones. Here the information provided delineates the extent of mastery of specified skills, either broadly as in phonology, or narrowly, as in blends or vowel sounds. Some standardized tests include a language sample, described below.

Only newly revised editions of a standardized test should be used for assessing students. The earlier/original editions may be used for only one year after the publication of the revision or replacement instrument.

See Volume I, Introduction of the *Test Resource Guide* and the Glossary in this volume for detailed descriptions of NRTs and CRTs.

Standardized testing as an approach to language assessment has been criticized because "it lacks linguistic realism and authenticity, has poor psychometric strength, has inherent and unavoidable bias, and lacks concurrent validity" (Shulman, Katz, & Sherman, 1994-95, p.53).

Descriptive testing. Descriptive or synergistic assessment investigates "all aspects of language behavior as it relates to the communication process" (Shulman, Katz, & Sherman, 1994-95, p.53); data are analyzed in terms of purposefulness, contextual appropriateness, and functional level. It is a holistic, process-oriented approach to language assessment and may include information garnered from a variety of settings.

The *language sample*, an important element in descriptive testing, is a collection of spontaneous or elicited oral or written communication that highlights the "individualistic nature of the child's communicative functioning" (Owens, 1992). The procedure is best used to indicate overall language functioning and

specific linguistic deficits. A language sample is a systematic approach to quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine both communication and linguistic competencies. Assessment professionals realize that a language sampling approach requires "considerable knowledge of language and of the variables that affect children's language performance" (Nelson, 1993).

Communication and Language Assessment Procedures

A variety of assessment techniques are used in assessing students with special needs.

Testing the student who is deaf or hard of hearing. Techniques for assessing students who are deaf or hard of hearing include, but are not limited to, speech reading, signed language (ASL and cued sign language). It is essential to ensure that the student understands the sign language of the test. Sometimes tests other than speech and language instruments are administered to these students to ascertain their receptive skills.

The educational audiologist determines amplification needs, auditory perception, and assessment modality. Hearing test results obtained by the educational audiologist are essential not only for these students' communication and language assessment, but also for their cognitive and educational evaluation. The speech and language professional should work in collaboration with the educational audiologist to ensure a valid evaluation of the student's communication and language development.

Testing the student with central auditory processing disorders. Some students may exhibit normal functional hearing, but may have a central auditory processing disorder (CAPD). These students demonstrate adequate hearing acuity (pure tones and words), but have difficulty integrating incoming language information. Students suspected of having CAPD should have a central auditory processing evaluation in addition to communication and language assessment.

Tests to determine CAPD are administered by an educational audiologist. Auditory skills are assessed to provide diagnostic information on the student's perception, processing, and cognitive levels. Individual skills include sensation, discrimination, localization, auditory attention, figure ground, discrimination, closure, synthesis, analysis, association, and memory (Butler, 1975; DeConde, 1984). Information about these skills provide other assessment professionals with important information integral to their evaluation of the student.

Testing the student who is non-verbal. Students who do not have verbal communication skills require special assessment procedures to plan appropriate interventions. They may benefit from

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assessment that utilizes different procedures, including instruments other than those assessing speech and language, to help in determining the student's language abilities and in selecting a procedure that will meet the student's needs. These may include assistive technology or augmentative/alternative communication systems. In addition, hearing test results will be important in their assessment.

The use of a particular augmentative device necessarily limits the assessment process. Assessment professionals should experiment with a range of devices and techniques that maximize a student's ability to communicate. Collaboration of assessment professionals using a multi-disciplinary approach is essential.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE TESTS

Communication/language and language proficiency tests require empirically determined representative, relevant, and recent norms, acceptable reliability for individual decision making, and validity related to the purposes and proposed uses of the tests. The test reviews that follow discuss the adequacy of these characteristics and define the appropriate use of the tests in New York City.

Norms. Test norms must be representative, usually of a national sample. Publishers should define clearly the sample used for standardization, as well as the number of students in it. Norms must be relevant to the group for whom they will be used such as the inclusion of large cities in the norming group for tests used by NYC assessment professionals. The standardization data should be no more than five to ten years old or the scores may be compromised by comparisons with outdated norms.

Comparisons are integral to NRTs. When using CRTs students are rated on mastery of objectives, not as compared to others; therefore, there is no need for norms. If there are cut-off scores, however, there should be some evidence that empirical procedures were used to determine mastery, non-mastery, or degrees of mastery.

Reliability. Some form of reliability is essential to every test as it reports the consistency or stability of the obtained scores. Traditional reliabilities are always reported for norm referenced tests, but other types of tests, as well, should possess test-retest reliability, interrater reliability, and/or internal consistency.

Validity. Validity depends chiefly upon the match between the author's purpose for developing the test and the user's objective. Although "the burden of validating tests still falls upon the test publisher, the test user, the person making

inferences on the basis of test scores, is responsible for knowing the validity of the use" (Geisinger, 1990, p.10). Potential users should examine statements of purposes and constructs carefully and determine their efficacy relative to other tests in the area.

Some test authors discuss their tests of language, particularly receptive language as measured by vocabulary items, as indicating a general cognitive level. Measures of vocabulary provide erroneous information about the student, even the student's language development, since the student may not have had the appropriate experiences to learn the "right language" (De Avila & Duncan, 1978).

Detailed discussions of norms, reliability, and validity can be found in Volume I, Introduction, Volume IV, Assessment of School Achievement, of the Test Resource Guide and this volume's Glossary.

Test Bias

Standardized tests today are generally sensitive to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and linguistic and cultural differences. Both statistical and nonstatistical approaches are *part of the development process*. As a result, standardized tests generally do not systematically discriminate against any specific group.

The assessment professional needs to recognize the student's educational and cultural experiences when selecting tests and interpreting results to avoid test bias. Inadvertently, bias can intrude into the assessment process for students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The use of vocabulary as an indication of language development penalizes the student who has not been exposed to the "right language" (De Avila & Duncan, 1978). Criteria such as the number of years the student has spent in an English language school system is critical in interpreting test results for that student.

Use of Tests with Second Language Learners

For the student for whom English is a second language, language tests in the native or first language are essential when a language deficit is suspected. When a deficit exists in the native or first language, special language interventions are indicated. When a deficit is nonexistent in the native or first language, then any delays may be due to language difference and the time needed to learn a second language rather than a language disorder. The student may need time and instruction to develop adequate language proficiency.

Language proficiency refers to a student's expressive and receptive language skills in the areas of phonology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics, and pragmatics. It differs from language dominance in which the degree of bilingualism is considered; this concept implies a comparison of the proficiencies of two or more languages (Payan, 1989). Assessment of English proficiency is necessary for students for whom English is a second language to determine eligibility for a bilingual evaluation and for placement in bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

In NYC the determination of eligibility for a bilingual evaluation is based upon results on the Home Language Survey and scores on the Language Assessment Battery (LAB). The process of determining entitlement to bilingual/ESL instruction is based on results of the LAB. Students for whom Spanish is their native or first language are given the LAB in Spanish initially to determine in which language they exhibit a greater level of proficiency. Second language learners whose native or first language is not Spanish are not assessed by the LAB in their native or first language but are assessed by the LAB in English only.

The assessment professional should be aware that there are very few valid or reliable standardized instruments to assess the English skills of second language learners. There are almost no tests available to us in languages other than English. The use of a non-standardized translation from English to another language is prohibited. Results are not useful because of differences in the difficulty level of language constructions, disregard of dialectical and regional differences, and lack of norms for the translation (Payan, 1989).

The student's language history provides valuable insight into his/her language development. Assessment professionals should consider the number of years the student has spent in an English language school system and the continuity and type of instruction that was experienced. In addition to this information, the assessment professional should be aware of the student's Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP) before recommending a language of instruction (Cummins, 1984; Payan, 1989). Informal observation of the student's communication and language abilities also provides important information. A checklist of skills for language competencies for second language learners is provided on page 8.

Test Administration

Standardized test administration procedures must be followed when the assessment professional is planning to report scores. NRTs are accompanied by instructions in the test manual which clearly

CHECKLIST OF SKILLS FOR LANGUAGE COMPETENCIES

Discourse	Socioinguistic	Grammar	Strategies
Retells an event with attention to sequence	Demonstrates various styles of speech: peer, baby, or adult talk	Uses noun/verb agreement	Joins groups and acts as if understands language/activities
Explains activity in present or near future	Uses diminutives and terms of endearment	Uses pronouns correctly	Demonstrates expressive ability
Shares what is experienced spontaneously	Uses courtesy and etiquette terms and titles of respect	Uses proper syntax	Counts on friends for help
Tells stories with personal emphases	Uses extreme variations in intonation	Uses verb tenses appropriately	Switches language
Switches language to resolve ambiguities		Uses dialectal variations	Observes and imitates
Switches language for elaboration		Uses complex sentence structure	Asks for information
Switches language to play with language			Reads
Switches language to clarify statements			Uses a dictionary
			Asks for repetition
			Guesses
			Repeats phrases
			Avoids difficult words/constructions

Source: CEC Today, August 1996, 7

delineate examiner behavior in administering the test. Deviation from specific directions destroys the connection to the norms and renders the scores meaningless. Any modification of the testing situation requires that test results be viewed and reported only qualitatively.

Assessment professionals should administer a complete test rather than use different subtests from different tests. Total scores and subtest scores from different tests are not comparable because of their different normative samples, even when they appear to be measuring the same skills. Comparative statements of strengths and weaknesses, abilities and deficits, when based on scores, cannot be reported if different tests were used to assess different skills.

Test Scores

The most appropriate scores for interpreting results of NRTs are percentiles and standard scores. Assessment professionals should use the standard error of measurement (SEM) in discussing scores with other educators and parents. Composite scores from a single test are always more reliable than subtest scores, but need to be interpreted with care because they average performance across skill domains. Grade and age equivalents are not used in NYC for reporting test results because of the potential confusion over a test score and the estimate of a student's instructional level.

Assessment professionals may only compare test scores directly when they are from the same test and same normative sample. Therefore, subtest scores from the same test or test battery may be compared to determine strengths and weaknesses. For triennial or re-evaluation comparisons, the test scores must come from the identical test; i.e. WISC III and WISC III, Key Math-Revised and Key Math-Revised, CELF-III and CELF-III.

Functional level is NOT a test score, but a concept used to interpret test scores. It helps professionals make placement decisions. The student's functional level generally is based on multiple tests and qualitative information from observation and the use of informal techniques and procedures.

CRT scores are generally reported as percents which indicate mastery or non-mastery of a skill or objective. Although the concept of mastery testing is one that is useful for instructional purposes, the determination of mastery is generally arbitrary. The percent correct to qualify for mastery is operationally defined. The cut-off point between those who mastered the skill and those who did not is not always empirically determined.

A detailed discussion of test scores is found in volume I, Introduction, of the *Test Resource Guide*.

Use of Test Results

The results from communication and language tests are used in determining eligibility, in planning interventions, and

determining termination of services. The use of these tests results should be guided by the concepts and ideas presented fully in Volume I, Introduction. In particular, in using communication and language test results, the assessment professional should remember that any test result is simply a snapshot of behavior at a given point in time, even when a score range is reported. No single test provides a perfect assessment of the true functional level of the student.

For many tests and for many students test scores should not be reported quantitatively. Tests that are unreliable are included in this restriction. Tests that are not valid should not have been administered at all. Test scores must not be reported for students for whom the normative sample is not representative. In these cases qualitative and descriptive information about student performance on the tasks covered by the test should take the place of a score. In all instances, the student's performance in classroom activities is a better indicator of communication and language skills than an unreliable, invalid score from a test with unrepresentative norms.

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