

INITIAL ASSESSMENT MATERIALS FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

*PROVISION OF FIRST LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL  
ASSESSMENT*



**ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario**

# **Provision of First Language/Bilingual Assessment**

**A Project of the ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario**

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## ***PROVISION OF ACADEMIC FIRST LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL ASSESSMENTS***

### **RATIONALE**

Although students learn at different rates, research indicates that students who arrive with little or no command of the school's language of instruction generally need from one and a half to two years of exposure to the language to achieve native-like conversational fluency. However, they need much longer -- from five to seven years -- to be able to use the language to deal with more complex ideas and to function academically on the level of first-language speakers (Cummins, 1984). Young arrivals with no schooling in their first language may take even longer -- from seven to ten years. (V. Collier, 1987).

This discrepancy between surface fluency and academic performance may be perceived to be a learning difficulty similar to that of students with learning disabilities. However, the learning difficulties of ESL/ELD students, reside in their inadequate mastery of English rather than in a genuine learning disability. What is required is more time for focused academic language development. On the other hand, some ESL/ELD students may have genuine learning disabilities that may not be accurately diagnosed because of additional ESL/ELD related factors.

The use of standardized tests of academic achievement with students from linguistic and ethnocultural diverse backgrounds is problematic. These tests are known to be culturally and linguistically biased in favour of English speaking, middle/upper class students of North American background. They have limited validity when used to assess students who are not proficient in English. The provision of first language/bilingual assessments can help prevent erroneous assessment and placement of students who have a language other than Standard Canadian English.

The Ministry of Education Policy/Program Memorandum No. 84, entitled *Equal Educational Opportunity for Students*, states:

“Under Policy/Program Memorandum No. 11, school boards are required to establish assessment procedures to identify a child's learning strengths and needs on entry to school or shortly thereafter, and to provide a program that meets the identified needs by building on the strengths. These procedures must be part of a process of continuous assessment and program planning as the child moves through elementary and secondary school.”

**“Cultural background and language facility must be considered in the selection of assessment techniques, in the interpretation of the results, and in the development of the programs...”**

“The information gathered from the initial and ongoing assessments is used primarily to determine the nature of the educational programs to be provided especially in the area of language. Decisions pertaining to the placement of students in either elementary or secondary school programs should only be made in the context of findings obtained through appropriate assessment and should be subject to frequent review.”

When ESL/ELD students are given opportunities to display acquired communication and academic skills in their first or dominant language; educators are able to gain valuable

information for the purpose of providing appropriate placement and programming. Information regarding speech and language development and assistance in granting of equivalent credits may also be provided through a first language/bilingual assessment.

*The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1 – 8, English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development, A Resource Guide (2001)* states:

“ESL/ELD students arrive with a variety of literacy experiences...Determining the student’s level of literacy in his or her first language will help clarify the level of support the student will require while learning English. The assistance of interpreters or translators and the use of dual language materials may be helpful, where those services and resources are available. The student’s proficiency in using the first language in initial writing tasks can provide information about his or her literacy skills.” (p.14)

*The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 – 12, English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development (1999)* states:

“*Language assessment* begins with the reception interview. Where possible, at least part of the assessment may be conducted in the student’s first or dominant language to allow for a broader view of his or her linguistic and cognitive development. For example, level of performance in reading and writing in English is seldom an indication of the student’s level of literacy development. A student who is functioning at or above grade level in his or her own language may not be able to perform nearly as well in English.” (pp. 5 and 6)

## **WHO IS INVOLVED IN A FIRST LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL ASSESSMENT**

There are a number of stakeholders involved in a first language/bilingual assessment. Clearly, the student is the focal point; however, there are other key players such as relevant school staff, i.e. administrator, classroom and/or the ESL/ELD teachers, School Team member(s), parents/guardians and assessor. Each of these people has a clearly defined role and they all need to work in coordination in order to best meet the needs of the students.

### ***Students:***

Ideally, all recently arrived ESL/ELD students, from Kindergarten to Grade 12 whose first/dominant language is a language other than Standard Canadian English should be assessed in their first or dominant language to ensure appropriate placement and programming. However, it may not always be feasible or possible for school boards to provide all newly arrived ESL/ELD students with a first language/bilingual assessment.

A first language/bilingual assessment is recommended for students who may be at risk for one or more of the following reasons:

- apparent learning difficulties in addition to ESL/ELD needs
- educational gaps/limited educational opportunities prior to arrival in Canada
- significant difficulty in adjusting to their new environment

It is important to remember that students who were born in Canada may have had limited exposure to English prior to entering Kindergarten if the home-language is a language other than Standard Canadian English. These children should be viewed as ESL/ELD learners. A first

language/bilingual assessment may provide more accurate information about their language development, learning style and programming needs.

### ***School:***

One or more school staff may be involved in the process of a first language/bilingual assessment. Usually, the teacher first identifies a concern and takes up the issue with the administrator, the ESL/ELD teacher or the School Team. Through this consultation a referral for a first language/bilingual assessment may be put forward.

It is important that the teacher/School Team clearly identify the concerns and provides adequate information to the person(s) involved in conducting the assessment. It is the responsibility of the school to contact the home and ensure that the parents understand the reason(s) for the assessment and obtain their consent.

### ***The Parents/Guardians:***

It is of the utmost importance to ensure that parents/guardians are consulted and agree to this assessment. Parents/guardians should have a clear understanding of the reasons why a first language/bilingual assessment is recommended which may include the reason(s) for referral and/or specific concerns that the school has raised regarding their child.

The role of the parents/guardians in a first language/bilingual assessment is two-fold. First, it is to provide pertinent information about the child's general and immigration background, developmental history, school history, etc.

Secondly, parents/guardians can prepare their child for the assessment by discussing with him/her the reasons for the assessment and informing the child that someone who speaks his/her language will be meeting and working with him/her at the school. This often helps in setting the scene for the assessment and the child is not surprised or caught off guard.

The interview with the parents/guardians, conducted by the assessor in their language, is an important part of the assessment process. In addition to providing the above information, it also gives the school the opportunity to respond to the parents'/guardians' questions and concerns in their own language.

### ***The Assessor:***

Some boards of education in Ontario have qualified individuals on staff to conduct first language/bilingual assessments for major language groups. However, given the diversity of the student population in Ontario and limited funding and resources, it is not possible for all school boards to have trained assessors on staff. Therefore, it is suggested that school boards have access to a trained cadre of assessors in major language groups who can be deployed on an as-needed basis.

The assessor is usually a person who:

- is fluent in the language of assessment (oral, reading and writing)
- has adequate knowledge about the culture and educational system of the student's country of origin
- has adequate knowledge and familiarity with the Canadian (Ontario) school system

- has had previous experience in working with students
- has been trained to conduct first language/bilingual assessments and is familiar with the protocol as well as the assessment materials

The role of the assessor is to gather information on the student's:

- family and cultural background
- social/cultural adjustment to the new environment
- educational background and experiences
- developmental history, medical/health information
- educational and career aspirations/expectations
- special talents and skills, hobbies and interests
- performance levels in oral fluency, literacy and mathematics

The information is gathered by dialoguing with students, parents/guardians, assessing the student's academic skills and analyzing previous school records.

### **WHEN TO CONDUCT A FIRST LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL ASSESSMENT**

A first language/bilingual assessment is most accurate and precise when it is conducted as soon as possible after the student's arrival before he/she begins to lose his/her oral and literacy skills in the first language or stops to develop them age appropriately. A timely first language/bilingual assessment of students who are experiencing undue difficulties in addition to ESL/ELD needs can ensure that placement and programming needs are met.

However, a first language/bilingual assessment conducted 2-3 years after the student's arrival can shed light on other aspects of the student's learning profile. These include: interference/transference from first language, level of maintenance of the first language, difficulties meeting curriculum expectations considering the student's educational background, length of schooling in Canada and/or supports and adaptations offered.

### **COMPONENTS OF A FIRST LANGUAGE/BILINGUAL ASSESSMENT**

A holistic approach is used when conducting a first language/bilingual assessment of the academic strengths and needs of the ESL/ELD student. Samples of aural/oral communication and literacy in the first language and/or English, depending on the student's English proficiency, are analyzed and mathematical skills are assessed. The information gathered is used to determine whether the performance levels are age appropriate, given previous school and home experiences. This information is shared with relevant school personnel so that, in collaboration with parents/guardians and student, informed decisions about academic placement and programming can be made.

The assessment usually takes place in the student's school, in the most enabling environment, away from noise and distractions. The assessment may take more than one session.

The following are the assessment components, resources and activities/strategies suggested for use during a first language/bilingual assessment. The assessor may choose one or more of the activities to assess each of the various skills.

## **Behavioural, Attitudinal and Personal Learning Skills**

Observations are made throughout the entire assessment and in the classroom regarding the attitude and behaviour of the student as well as his/her personal learning style, such as the ability to work independently, motivation, distractibility, etc.

## **Receptive and Expressive Oral Language Skills**

### **Activities:**

- oral interview
- describing a picture
- drawing/illustrating and describing
- retelling of a familiar story, an anecdote or TV show
- sequencing activities
- following and giving directions
- flannel board activities
- barrier games
- discussing topics of interest, personal experiences, classroom work samples, etc.

For younger students, the assessment should include evaluation of cognitive skills, such as:

- recognizing colours, familiar objects, common animals, body parts
- understanding of numbers
- understanding of spatial, temporal and comparison concepts

## **Listening Comprehension Skills**

**Resources:** graded story books/passages/stories on tape in the student's first language, preferably from his/her country of origin.

### **Activities:**

- listening to a passage or story and
- retelling/answering comprehension questions
- illustrating the story

## **Reading (Oral and Silent)**

### **Activities:**

- for students with limited reading skills, the student reads:
  - the alphabet letters
  - simple characters
  - signs and labels
  - individual letters
  - picture books, etc.
- for students with literacy skills, the student:
  - reads passages/stories (graded texts from student's country of origin)
  - reads newspaper/magazine articles
  - reads excerpts from subject texts, etc.
  - retells/summarizes events/ideas (orally and/or written)
  - answers comprehension questions (orally and/or written)
  - illustrates and/or dramatizes
  - completes cloze reading passages, etc.

## **Writing**

### **Activities:**

- for students with limited writing skills, the student:
  - writes alphabet letters/simple characters
  - writes individual words/phrases
  - writes personal information (name, phone number, etc.)
  - labels pictures
  - copies alphabet letters/simple characters, individual words/phrases
  - dictates phrases/sentences, simple stories
  - draws a picture and labels
  
- for students who have acquired writing skills, the student:
  - writes or completes sentences about interests/experiences
  - writes a story, a free composition, a guided composition, a letter, a summary, a response to a reading
  - is dictated sentences or a story

## **Mathematics**

### **Resources and Activities:**

- for students with limited math skills, the student:
  - uses manipulative materials for counting, sorting, etc.
  
- for students who have acquired math skills
  - samples of classroom work
  - tasks from graded math textbooks/resource books
  - ERGO – Mathematics Assessment, Secondary (2002)
  - TDSB Multilingual Education Services Math Test – Grades 1-8
  - Ottawa-Carlton District School Board Mathematics Evaluation Test
  - computer math activities, etc.

## **THE ASSESSMENT REPORT and INFORMATION SHARING**

The information gathered through the assessment process is summarized in a written report and presented to the relevant school personnel. Recommendations for programming and/or placement are arrived at collaboratively.

The assessment results and the recommendations made are shared with the parents/guardians by the multilingual assessor either at a school level meeting or by phone, as appropriate. It may also be necessary to track and review the student's progress and growth over a period of time in order to determine future steps.