

# Electronic Q & A

## *Follow-up for the TESOL Spotlight Session* **“Navigating the Special Education ELL Highway”**

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### Questions #1 & #2:

Submitted by: Peg Hurley, ELL Teacher Columbia, Missouri

**1. Why is the definition of migrant so limited? In Columbia, Missouri we had several Mexican families come for the roofing business after a hail storm. Now all the roofs are finished and they are moving on. They are truly migrants in my opinion, but there is no added support for them.**

Ultimately, the migrant definition is determined at the Federal level, and is based solely on "agricultural related work." It looks a little different from state to state. We have many families who came here as migrant workers, and for one reason or another have left that work for more stable employment opportunities. Migrant work in Missouri looks very different, depending upon where you are. In Milan, MO. for instance, workers at the local pork processing plant, depending upon what their specific job is, qualify as migrant. The definition of migrant is applied to laborers in the pork, beef, poultry, etc., businesses due-in-part to the high turn-over rate in employment for these types of jobs. Migrants do not have to be of a nationality, culture, or language background other than English speaking/American culture. Particularly in the southeast and southwest regions of Missouri, we have many families that qualify for migrant work because they pick crops (melons, cucumbers, tomatoes, etc., or they work in the cotton gins which only operate during a specific season).

I see your point about the nature of the roofing business being migrant-type work-when looking at a definition for “migrant”- they do move frequently; however, it does not fit the “qualifying definition” for migrant in Missouri. While we cannot include them in our "migrant counts" educators do need to be sensitive to the educational needs of the children from these families as well. (Theresa Armentrout)

**2. How are the SpEd tests for ELL students biased? Can you give an example of a biased question?**

I can give you some general examples of biased questions...

--Nonverbal IQ test with graphics (pictures, symbols, shapes, etc.) that students are expected to respond to by pointing/choosing their response. Bias: we have students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds that DO NOT use these same images/patterns, etc. in communication and in some cases, these do not even exist in any form of the written/oral discourse of the student's first language/culture. Also, the student's lack of familiarity with test items demonstrates bias against the student.

--Use of words/ideas in the assessment item that is specific to a mono-linguistic English speaking population that simply DOES NOT exist in language/culture of the student being assessed. If you simply remove these items from the assessment/choose not to score them, this impacts the validity of the assessment and automatically renders the

score useless, but then, to give the assessment with the items included has the same effect where validity and reliability are concerned.

Just another note/example: on the WISC test, when students are given the sets of story pictures in a scrambled order and expected to put these in the proper order of events. The pictures/images are NOT going to be familiar to most of the students that come to us from other countries. Also, for students from some cultures/languages the process of sequencing is not a familiar task. There are so many things to consider...for instance, depending on the culture/language, students may be accustomed to reading from bottom-up and right to left, or using symbols or pictures instead of using an alpha-numeric system to represent words, phrases, numbers; all of these impact the effectiveness and legitimacy of assessment and instruction and pose confusion for the learner and worse, the possibility of misinterpretation of test results, on the part of the teacher.

IQ tests in general, are heavily dependent upon language. The items in any IQ test used to establish criterion scores in our educational system (for use in the application of the discrepancy model to make an eligibility determination) were written for English speaking test-takers. When applying the test to an ELL, the test essentially ends up measuring the student's lack of English language proficiency. Look at the population on which the test was normed, if your student (consider cultural and linguistic background) is not represented in the population, the test is not valid for use with that student for the purpose of a score. **(Theresa Armentrout)**

I concur with Theresa's comments and would like to add some additional examples. Many school psychologists have moved to nonverbal tests in an effort to reduce the bias in verbal tests. But not only are the graphics, structure and content of the test likely to be so unfamiliar as to yield unreliable scores, but when the nonverbal items are administered using gestures rather than words, the gestures have also been found to convey culturally/linguistically different messages. The UNIT (Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test) is administered with gestures that are obscenities or insults in some cultural groups; this was also a problem with the DISTAR program. Of more concern to me, is the general unreliability of the construct validity of the commonly used standardized tests for determining eligibility for Special Education services. A specific example of this is the common test element of asking the student to name the object depicted, maybe followed by asking the student to then tell how it is used or why it is used. This is a specific cognitive task that makes sense to a Western European based way of thinking of the world. It is not a cognitive process used in all cultures; for example, in some cultures, like traditional Kiowa, Apache, Navajo culture there is no name for a fish versus other water creatures and they do not use them for anything, not to eat, not to cook, not to fertilize the ground, nothing. Every culture has items like that: things that have no "name", no "purpose", no "use" and additionally no way to describe or talk about the thing, feeling, or concept. Thus even finding an interpreter or asking for translation will be senseless and thus biased. An additional validity issue is the way norming is done. These tests are normed by taking random samples of students from representative populations who are given the test. The sheer numbers and diversity of our continually changing ELL population mean that these norm samples are NOT likely to be truly representative of all of our actual ELL students. This is why I always recommend that assessment teams review all tests and evaluation procedures at the local

level for appropriateness for specific populations. An item/process analysis is not that difficult to do and a resource book of modifications and cautions can be kept in the district for reference. **(Dr. Catherine Collier)**

**Question #3:**

Submitted by Cindy West; Lincoln Public Schools (Nebraska)

**3. How do you determine appropriate RTI practices for ELLs?**

The RTI for ELLs takes into consideration their language (level of proficiency in English and L1) and how it is to be supported throughout the process, as well as being heavily dependent upon the cultural/social/educational/family/and when appropriate, medical history...essentially, a comprehensive consideration for the background of the student!

Also, in an appropriate RTI for ELLs, the ELL is compared only to similar peers (another ELL with similar "background").

Considering these aspects of the student when problem solving impact the kinds of interventions that are determined appropriate (by the RTI team, which includes a teacher knowledgeable about ELLs) and then implemented by the team. It will be unique per individual, but there are some standard processes/events that will be similar for all students going through RTI. For one example, interventions, once determined, are administered for a period of 6-8 weeks (time without gaps--student was in school consistently, interventions applied consistently, etc), during which time, data collection and observations are on-going. **(Theresa Armentrout)**

Theresa has given a good overview of the issues involved in setting up an appropriate RTI for ELL students. I would add that one of the challenges of determining what is appropriate is determining exactly what aspect of the presenting problem(s) to focus upon first and what specific intervention(s) will adequately address the issue during the 6 to 8 weeks (no longer than 12). In Nebraska, I can direct you to Nancy Rowch & Steve Srb or your state department of education for copies of our guidelines on doing this. Also there are two well trained school psychologists, one in Kearney and one in Grand Island that they can direct you to for assistance closer to home.

"Focus on Children; Do only Good." **(Dr. Catherine Collier)**

**Question #4:**

(Submitted by a school psychologist/assessment team member)

**4. I sometimes think that the tests given by the school psychologists show me how the child does in a school-like setting. In other words they are testing how this child will do in an American school. For example if there is a question about how to use a calendar, and the child never saw a calendar before, I would say that's good information for me, and perhaps it is a deficit area for the child. So, is it appropriate that I conclude that it is ok to have what we call "bias" because the test is telling me how the child will do in school? The test is comparing that child to other kids. In a way I think that is good information.**

The chief dangers with using "the tests given by the school psychologists" to tell you how a child will do in school are:

- 1) This is not the purpose or intent of these tests, thus you are not in compliance with federal law which states that tests can only be used for the purpose for which they were created/normed/validated;
- 2) A gap in experience or exposure is not a "deficit" in the child as you can quickly address this gap by facilitating exposure (temporary gaps are neither special needs nor deficits); and
- 3) These tests are not predictive of how a student will do in school; they only tell you how much they have missed up to this point in time.

Good/appropriate instruction will change anyone's performance on these instruments – another indication of how inaccurate and lacking in validity they can be as either truly measuring a person's capacity to learn or predict how well they will do with adequate instruction. (Dr. Catherine Collier)

For more information regarding the law and appropriate use of assessments in the case of ELLs, please check out the information under the heading, “The Law” and on the Resources page, under the heading of Early Childhood, located on my website:

<http://rpd.c.truman.edu/mell.asp> (Theresa Armentrout)

#### **Question #5:**

(Submitted by school psychologist/assessment team member)

**5. The only ELL children we have tested in my school are Korean or Mexican. Do you have any information about what I should be aware of for those two cultures?**

As you are probably aware, it is impossible for a school psychologist, or any person, to gain 100% cultural competence and be knowledgeable about every language/culture for every cultural group in existence. This is the reason it is all the more important that intervention team members conduct non-traditional assessments; which include non-traditional family interviews. These help the team to gain more knowledge about a particular child and the culture/background from which he/she comes. The difference between the cultural constructs for one Korean or Mexican family is going to be different for another family from the same Korean or Mexican culture. However, there are things that you can learn, in a general way, about the Korean or Mexican cultures that may impact your interaction with the family initially; such as, appropriate greetings, personal space, gestures, facial expression, body language, etc. but the things that you are most interested in knowing about culture for a specific child per any culture group will come directly from your interaction (interviews) with the child and his/her family. Catherine can probably point you in the direction of some resources on general culture and for general information about various cultures, you can refer to a few resources that come to mind (keeping in mind that they provide rather general information and the most reliable information will be obtained through your interaction with the child and family):

-Lynch, Eleanor W. and Marci J. Hanson. (2004). *Developing Cross-Cultural Competence*. Baltimore, Maryland: Brookes Publishing

-Haynes, J. (2002). *The Culture Quiz*. From <http://www.everythingsl.net>

-Information available on 190 cultures of the world at: [www.culturegrams.com](http://www.culturegrams.com)

-also, please don't hesitate to investigate the resources available from Dr. Catherine Collier located on her website: [www.crosscultured.com](http://www.crosscultured.com) (Theresa Armentrout)

Please contact Theresa Armentrout or Catherine Collier for questions/permissions regarding this PDF document. [tmarie@truman.edu](mailto:tmarie@truman.edu) or [www.crosscultured.com](http://www.crosscultured.com)