

Bilingual Language Disorders in Spanish-Speaking Children

Bilingual Spanish-speaking children with language disorders are often difficult to identify. If a child from a Spanish language background has a speech or language disorder, evidence of the problem should be observable in both English and Spanish. Children who score low on standardized tests are often identified as having communication disorders if they score significantly below the norm in both English and Spanish.

Poor performance on norm-referenced tests, however, can occur for a variety of reasons. Bilingual children vary considerably in the extent to which they have been exposed to English and Spanish. Children who find themselves in an environment in which there is limited opportunity for continued use of Spanish often lose proficiency in that language as they develop skills in English. This phenomenon is referred to as language loss. Language loss is a normal process that occurs frequently among children from bilingual backgrounds.

Norm-referenced tests should never be used as the sole basis for identifying bilingual children with communication disorders. Children within the bilingual population vary considerably in the extent to which they have been exposed to the native language and English. Some bilingual children use Spanish at home all of the time, whereas others use mostly English.

Speech-language pathologists often report that their school districts require the use of norm-referenced tests in identifying bilingual children with communication disorders. It is more important to examine how the student responds to language instruction. If the student has little difficulty learning language skills, he/she may not need the assistance of a speech-language pathologist.

As discussed by Mattes and Omark (1991) and Roseberry-McKibbin (2014), bilingualism is not a handicap. The identification of communication disorders requires a comprehensive assessment of what the child knows about language and documentation of specific problems that are affecting language learning. Test scores do not provide this information. Educational decisions that are based primarily on test scores can easily result in misdiagnosis of the problem.

When conducting assessments, it is important to examine how children learn. By examining how children respond to instruction, professionals can determine if children are truly in need of special education intervention.

[Academic Communication Associates](#) offers a variety of assessment products in their catalog that can be helpful in identifying bilingual children with communication disorders.

Reference:

Mattes, L. and Omark, D. (1991) Speech and language assessment for the bilingual handicapped. Oceanside: CA: Academic Communication Associates.

Roseberry-McKibbin, C. (2018). Multicultural students with special language needs: Practical strategies for assessment and intervention. (5th edition) Oceanside, CA: Academic Communication Associates

<https://acadcom.com>

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