

Voices from the Field: Mary Clare Freeman



Q1: As a bilingual special educator, you have particular knowledge regarding the importance of differentiation for English Language Learners in your classroom. Describe why assessment is particularly important for this growing population of children and as well as some of the challenges in assessing these children?

A lot of formal assessments I have used in the past and presently exist in SpEd are skewed and non-representative of ELLs (and many of our other minority SpEd students, at that). I do not rely heavily upon them, because I find them biased – so I tend to use more diverse reading, writing and math assessments, and norm them based on what age/grade they are working from. The negative side of this is that they are not normed traditionally against ELL, but their English-speaking peers – which presents a data problem because it is unfair to norm ELL students against native English speakers. But, it allows me the flexibility to understand what students know/learn and how they learn, as well as to monitor their individual progress. I personally focus a great deal on vocabulary development to boost comprehension, and I have found that progress monitoring/assessments have been useful to individualize lessons for students, so their specific needs are met.

Naturally, my greatest concern is the duality of vocabulary for ELLs – functional and academic – and what type will be more utilitarian and allow the individual to be successful. Generally speaking with SpED ELLs, both sets of vocabulary are under-developed, and can set a student up for failure inside and outside of the classroom if not appropriately addressed. Assessments, again, allow me to narrow which skillset are lacking, and individualize lessons for that child.

Q2: Please reflect on a specific instance when you effectively used assessment and progress monitoring to enhance the teaching and learning of an English Language Learner. What tools did you use? How did you use assessment to plan the environment and instruction as well as evaluate the progress of the child over time?

I will forever and always think of Marlon, a student I had in Los Angeles in 2010 who had several learning disabilities, which made language acquisition in both English and Spanish difficult – he could neither read, write nor speak successfully in either language. The problem for his family was not understanding what they could do at home to help him learn *and* help his disability. The problem at school was that there was not much his teachers in his subject courses could do to address this at the age of 15 - when he was supposed to be taking classes like Biology and English II with his grade-level peers.

For Marlon, I used a variety of assessments to understand where he was – and I did them in both languages to fairly assess his skills. I used Woodcock Johnson, Ekwall and Shanker, CBMs, Aimsweb and then Reading A-Z. Only two of the assessments were available in Spanish – but the results on both ends were consistent (and maybe a bit higher in Spanish than they were in English). What the tests revealed (besides low comprehension, decoding, fluency, writing, reading, listening, mathematics, and so on) was that Marlon had higher comprehension when reading out loud than when reading to himself, and had stronger fluency when reading out loud than when reading to himself. With this information, I was able to better meet Marlon’s needs in this classroom and suggest things for his family.

Marlon, for example, was given readings at home to read out loud with a parent, then record himself while he was reading and to practice reading with his recorded self. At school, Marlon was allowed to read to himself out loud and with a partner who was a bit higher than he. He worked on vocabulary verbally as well with manipulatives, and so on. The most important component was allowing Marlon to use the *same* progress monitoring assessment prompts (usually 3 different reading, writing and math) when he was reassessed every few weeks, specifically to boost confidence and for consistency. And once he mastered those, he was given a totally different one to see if he had made progress – and he had. His grades did improve, but his language acquisition over time significantly improved – but most importantly his confidence and demeanor which allowed him to take on more personally.