Refresher!

1. English learners (ELs) are a large—and growing—student group!

2. They have unique linguistic and academic developmental pathways.

3. They benefit uniquely well from early education programs. Ideal: builds on native language development and begins English acquisition process.

4. Our data on multilingual student demographics—and achievement—are limited and inconsistent.
Goal for early education programs

1. Meet these kids “where” they are, in order to…
2. Optimally support their linguistic and academic development.

Challenge

Programs rarely have good data on where these kids are, particularly as far as language screening goes.
The Basic Idea

• Language screenings are an early education best practice.
• Teachers can better support students when they have a clear picture of what they know and can do in all of their languages.
  – i.e. the needs of a student with limited vocabulary in Mandarin Chinese and no knowledge of English are different than the needs of a student with strong oral proficiency in Spanish and some exposure to English.
  – Without assessing ELs’ language proficiencies, teachers can’t tailor their instruction.
The Basic Process

1. School sends a home language survey to students’ families,

2. Students whose families report speaking a non-English language at home receive a language screening to ascertain their English language abilities, and

3. (Very) occasionally, they are given assessments to see what they know and can do in their native languages.

4. Students still developing their English proficiency are formally classified as “English Learners.”
States’ current policies

According to the National Institute for Early Education Research and the Center for Enhancing Early Education Outcomes:

1. Only 22 of the 40 states offering public pre-K report out the percentage of ELs enrolled in these programs.

2. And just 16 of the states actually require publicly-supported pre-K programs to conduct language screenings.
Example: Head Start Performance Standard §1302.33

i. Conduct screenings and assessments in the language or languages that best capture the child’s development and skills in the specific domain;

ii. Assess language skills in English and the child’s home language, to assess both the child’s progress in the home language and in English language acquisition; and,

iii. Ensure that those conducting the screening or assessment know and understand the child’s language and culture and have sufficient skill level in the child’s home language to accurately administer the screening or assessment and to record and understand the child’s responses, interactions, and communications.


Think like an investor!

• Washington, D.C. Universal Pre-K program in 2014–15:
  – 64% of three-year-olds
  – 86% of four-year-olds
  – 12,612 in total! (Including Owain and Carys Williams.)
  – Around the same number of pre-K students as the entire state of Massachusetts.
  – Per student spending (federal and district funds): $17,509.

• D.C. Public Schools’ (DCPS) language screening rules:
  – DCPS provides a language screener, but leaves it to schools’ discretion whether to use it for pre-K students.
  – $17,509 per child, and teachers may never assess students’ language abilities.
Beware!
Concerns

• *All* early learners (0–8) in U.S. schools are English Learners.

• Valid, reliable, firm data on language proficiency is hard to get, especially birth to five years old.

• The field: a number of serious, tested K–12 language proficiency assessments. Fewer in the 0–5 space.

• It’s not enough to have a viable language screener. It also needs to be administered carefully and consistently.

• These kinds of data limitations often get ignored. Early language screeners are for informing instruction and (cautiously) watching trends in student demographics. (i.e. not attached to accountability stakes)
Data, mandates, resources

• Minnesota’s Learning for English Academic Proficiency and Success Act (LEAPS)
  – Mandates that districts assess ELs’ native language proficiency in addition to English (across PreK–12).
  – But around 40% of Minnesota’s ELs speak Hmong or a Somali language.

  • Problem #1: These languages have non-standardized writing systems (and limited history as written languages).
  • Problem #2: As a result, there are no validated assessments available to assess ELs’ native language proficiency.
Head Start on the difficulty

• “For children whose home languages [are] NOT English or Spanish, it is virtually impossible to find valid and reliable [assessment] instruments”
States’ options

1. Mandate that state-funded early education programs assess ELs’ English & native language proficiency.
   i. Could choose statewide language screener (as in K–12).
   ii. Could approve a list of appropriate, reliable screeners (as in Head Start).

2. Provide language screeners to early education programs. (This may involve developing new ones!)

3. Provide professional development for early educators on the importance and appropriate use of language screener assessments (and language proficiency data).
   i. Pair with training on young ELs’ oral language development.
The Dual Language Learners National Work Group

• New America’s Dual Language Learners National Work Group provides a policy-driven focus on language learners in the early and elementary years. The Work Group conducts research, develops recommendations, and disseminates new ideas to policymakers, practitioners, and the public to improve outcomes for dual language learners (DLLs), children from birth through age eight who are learning English in addition to their native languages.

• https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/dual-language-learners/

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