Reviewed by Shikun Li

In this article by Sanchez and colleagues (2013), the authors argued that one of the significant contributors to disproportionate representation of bilingual learners in special education was the results of standardized tests. Most standardized assessments are given in English only, and their results contribute less in truly reflecting bilingual students’ linguistic ability, cognition level, or academic achievements, let alone help with students’ literacy development. The authors also pointed out that bilingual students would easily feel stressed during the test, if the questions are not contextualized. Even though many types of accommodations are offered to assist bilingual students to complete tests (e.g. linguistic modification of monolingual assessment, extra testing time, allowance of using glossary in first language, etc.), it could not guarantee the validity or reliability of results of using a monolingual assessment on bilingual students. Large number of bilingual students is falsely assigned to special education programs because of their poor performance on norm-referenced monolingual tests. Therefore, in order to avoid overlooking within-group variability among bilinguals/English language learner, this research used a multidimensional bilingual assessment approach to examine bilingual students’ competencies.

Holding cognitive performance constant, the researchers compared students’ test results across languages. All the assessments were selected based on the psychometric properties of assessments. Fifty bilingual students who came from the urban district of the Southwestern U.S participated in this study. They were all given special education referrals. The battery of assessments included nonverbal and verbal cognitive measures, as well as receptive and expressive linguistic measures. The results revealed the complexities of bilingual language development, and of the relationship between bilingual students’ language proficiency and performances of academic tasks.

The results verified the challenge that educators face in accurately assessing bilingual students. Since the reliability and validity of bilingual assessments is the main focus of the current study, it would have been more helpful if the information about the psychometric properties of the selected assessments had been provided. Overall, the study played an important role in reminding educators of the importance of employing multidimensional assessment in accurately assessing bilingual/English Language learner students’ language proficiency.
References

