

Chapter 10

An Assets–Oriented, Formative Oral Language Assessment for Multilingual Students: The Oral Language Record

Adria F. Klein

Saint Mary's College of California, USA

Allison Briceño

San José State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces an assets-oriented oral language formative assessment tool for use with multilingual students. The assessment tool, called the Oral Language Record (OLR), was developed to help teachers listen to, record, and analyze authentic student talk in a variety of settings. It provides valuable information about the vocabulary and language structures that students use, helps determine current instructional needs, provides a frame for capturing student talk, and documents growth over time. The OLR contains a continuum based on observable behaviors and an analysis tool that helps teachers determine next steps in instruction based on their observations. Used in conjunction with a student's writing sample and observation of the child's reading, the OLR provides a holistic view of a multilingual student's language and literacy acquisition, enabling the teacher to focus on the child's linguistic strengths to plan future instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Multilingual students (MSs) participate in a variety of school settings across the U.S. While some settings, such as Dual Language programs, are supportive of home language development, 97% or more of MSs are in English-only settings (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015) where they are asked to leave their home language at home and use only what schools consider to be “academic English” (Valdés, Capitelli, & Alvarez, 2011). MSs who are classified as English Learners in these monoglossic linguistic settings are

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often considered “at risk” due to limiting English assessment measures that do not take the full range of their linguistic knowledge into account (Hakuta, 2011). Methods to accelerate students’ English acquisition faster than the typical 4-7 years elude teachers and researchers alike (Goldenberg, 2008; Hakuta, 2011). This chapter proposes an assets-oriented perspective on the formative assessment of MSs’ language.

Introduced herein, the Oral Language Record (OLR) is an assets-oriented formative assessment tool that builds on students’ linguistic capital, or “the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). It is critical to value the different languages and varieties of languages that students bring to school – including register, accent, discourse style, lexical choices, syntax, non-verbal communication style, pragmatics, and the cultural aspects of language, such as whether or not it is respectful to look at an adult in the eye during conversation. By capturing students’ authentic language, the OLR provides a means for exploring language through an assets-orientation.

The OLR is a formative assessment tool that classroom teachers or specialists can use anytime, in any setting. The goal of the OLR is to help teachers listen to, record, and analyze student interactions in a variety of settings, including whole group, small group, pairs, or with a teacher. This process provides valuable information about what language structures the student holds, helps determine current instructional needs, provides a frame for capturing student talk, and documents growth over time. The OLR contains a five-dimension continuum of language development based on observable behaviors and an analysis tool that helps teachers determine next steps in instruction based on their observations. There are a variety of ways to capture student talk, including paper and pencil, audio and video recording with phones, video cameras, iPad, iPod, digital recorders, etc. With practice, capturing and codifying oral language becomes easier and more valuable as a formative assessment process. Using this protocol consistently (e.g., monthly) with MSs provides documentation of growth and continually informs a teacher’s next steps. Explicit attention to MSs’ oral language is an important, but often neglected, method of social justice pedagogy.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide K-12 classroom teachers with an assets-oriented formative assessment tool that can be used and interpreted flexibly, anywhere, at any time. Based on classroom needs, we developed this tool with colleagues from the New Teacher Center and with financial support from the Hewlett Foundation. This chapter (1) briefly explains the components and administration of the Oral Language Record (OLR); (2) provides a case study of a first grade MS, Nicholas, and walks the reader through an assets-oriented analysis of his OLR; (3) makes connections to Nicholas’ literacy development to show how his language strengths and needs were evidenced in his reading and writing; and (4) concludes with implications for instruction. First, we provide background on what the OLR is, explore research that shows the reciprocity among reading, writing and oral language, and reflect on how the OLR relates to MSs’ academic success.

BACKGROUND

This section connects language assessment and instruction to equity to show the significance and purpose behind the OLR. The benefits and challenges of traditional language assessments are discussed, and we then briefly explain how the OLR addresses these challenges. Finally, the reciprocity of oral language, reading and writing is addressed to deepen understandings of the significance of language assessment and instruction. Since our focus is the K-12 classroom, we discuss assessment and instruction from a

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