

Assessing multilingual people IS different!

Hi! I've been posting throughout February about assessing students for cognitive differences, like dyslexia. I've been talking about some of the benefits of doing a cognitive assessment, and also some of the pitfalls that we might come across. So, for example, I talked a little bit about the myth that people who use English as an additional language will have to wait until they speak better English - otherwise we can't assess them. If you want to read more about my response to that, go to the ELT well website and look at the posts, and you'll see what I've written there.

I do sometimes come across advice that is given to assessors that - quite frankly - is not that helpful. People tell me that they've been advised to find an assessment in the student's first language - and an assessor who speaks their language. Depending on what their first language is, that might actually be quite challenging. There just aren't assessment tools in every language!

And sometimes the official guidance of regulatory bodies is equally vague, and they say things like "When you're assessing multilingual students, you should take into account that they're using English as an additional language." Take into account how? What are we supposed to take into account? So I'd like to take a few minutes here and just talk about some of the ways in which assessing multilingual learners IS different from assessing our monolingual English speaking students, and what sort of things we need to keep in mind - what we need to 'take into account' when we're assessing them.

When we're working with multilingual learners there are many variables that we need to consider. They are likely to have had different educational opportunities, from what we might be expecting, different life experiences, and of course, perhaps most obviously, a different linguistic repertoire. And by that I mean: not just their first language or their strongest language and English, but all the languages that they've been exposed to, or that they've had the opportunity to use, and maybe even have some education in some other languages. We need to find out what those languages are. Some of our learners actually have very complex linguistic repertoires, and we need to take a very detailed background history in order to understand how these different languages might have impacted on their cognitive development.

Some of our learners may not have been in a formal learning environment before, so we can't reasonably expect them to behave as if they are used to sitting still for hours, and to only speak at certain times, and to follow the very complex routines of the college or school day. It's probably not that they're being naughty or disruptive or disorganized, but until we get a full history and really understand that person, we can't really make sense of the behaviors that we see. And similarly, we can't make sense of their academic performance, if it's mediated through English and English is a language that they're not very familiar with. We really need to take the English language out of the assessment situation. And it's not just in literacy tasks that we really assume a lot of linguistic knowledge, and cultural background knowledge. Tests of memory or speed of processing, which are administered in English, are going to be really *really* challenging for anybody who is still in the early stages of learning English.

So that's why I put together the CAML materials: the Cognitive Assessments for Multilingual Learners. This is the young learners' one, this is the one for adults. And the idea is that we take English out of the situation and we ask them to do certain tasks - using their own language or sometimes using no language - just to see what they can do, when they're not having to do it all in a second language, which is, you know, much more challenging. So we can get underneath the language, and see what's really happening for them, where their strengths are, as well as the things that they find challenging. And we can give them credit for the learning that they have done in other situations. It's really designed for teachers to make a start on the assessment, but of course, if you need a formal identification, you're going to need a qualified assessor to help you with that.

If you'd like to know more about the CAML (Cognitive Assessments for Multilingual Learners) go to the website eltwell.com, and you'll find a page there about assessing for dyslexia and other specific learning differences - both assessing monolingual English speaking people, as well as multilingual people. On the ELT well website you'll also find that you can download your assessment starter kit - you'll you get an observation sheet and a checklist to work through with the student, as well as some information about what to do with that. So you can get started on the assessment, and you can decide if you want to take it further, or if maybe you've got enough information so that you can teach that student the way they need to be taught. So don't be afraid of taking that first step, and just looking a bit closer at a learner, to see if they maybe do have a specific learning difference. If you've got any questions at all, feel free to get in touch - I'd be very happy to help you if I can!