

CLD Corner

By: Scott Prath, MA, CCC-SLP; Keith Lebel, MA, CCC-SLP; Marie Wirka, MS, CCC-SLP, CLD Task Force Guest Authors

The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity. Questions are answered by members of the TSHA task force on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity. Members for the 2009-2010 year include **Ellen Stubbe Kester**, PhD, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Lynette Austin**, PhD, CCC-SLP; **Gina Glover**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Katsura Aoyama**, PhD; **Nelcy L. Cardenas**, MS CCC-SLP; **M. Ruth Fernandez**, PhD, CCC-SLP; **Barbara Fernandes**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Benigno Valles**, MS CCC-SLP; and **Jacqueline Lopez**, BS (student member). Submit your questions to gina.glover@fwisd.org. Look for responses from the CLD Task Force on TSHA's website and the *Communicologist*.

The CLD Task Force is now offering half- and full-day trainings for school districts, Education Service Centers, university programs and other agencies on **Assessment and Intervention with CLD Populations**. For information, contact Gina Glover at gina.glover@fwisd.org.

Does anyone on the CLD Task Force have a particular interest in the African American English (AAE) dialect, or knowledge with regards to the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV) test? I am finding that SLPs are very sensitive to assessment issues for English language learners, but not so much for Standard English dialectal variations, particularly AAE dialect.

The TSHA task force invited a group of guest contributors from Bilingual Speech and Language Services in Austin, Texas, to respond to this request. We appreciate they accepted that invitation and below is their response.

The over-representation of minority populations has been a frequent topic of discussion in our practice at Bilingualism. Many of the districts we work with have allowed us to examine their proportionality data at the school level, and we have seen a recurring pattern of over-representation of Hispanic and African American populations in special education programs. This is a pattern that has been documented across the nation for many years. As the speech-language pathologist (SLP) director noted in the above comment, many SLPs are becoming sensitive to the differences in language development of second-language learners. However, language variations, such as those of AAE, are often considered incorrect and result in errors when determining eligibility for speech services. Recall that children should not be viewed as having a speech or language disorder because they speak a variety of English other than Mainstream American English (MAE) (ASHA, 2003). The question remains; How do we go about reducing

the disproportion of African American students in special education? A combination of better testing tools and strategies as well as professional sensitivity could assist in paving the way.

The DELV is a norm-referenced diagnostic test designed to identify speech and language disorders/delays in children who speak all varieties of English, including AAE and MAE. While the DELV was standardized on the general US population, it was also demographically adjusted to include the most representative sample of AAE speakers. This was done to ensure that children who are speakers of this dialect can be fairly assessed by a comparison to the normative group. Other biases in standardized testing that are addressed by the DELV include its design in terms of its focus on universal aspects of language, thereby allowing clinicians to distinguish a speech or language difference from a speech or language disorder.

The DELV addresses four domains: syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and phonology. In each of the domains, it is generous in its acceptable responses, as it allows responses that are consistent with the language variation that occurs in different dialects. For example, one item on the test that assesses use of prepositions is, "He's not climbing with the cat, he's climbing...." One acceptable response is "by himself." This response is not representative of MAE, but it is a response frequently given by typically developing children who speak AAE. While it truly assesses the target structure, which is inclusion and correct use of the preposition, it does not penalize the child for using a different form of the object pronoun. The dropped "to be" verb is another feature of AAE that is accepted in responses. For example, "No, cuz that one standin' up" is an acceptable response to an item designed to evaluate an understanding of quantifiers ("Is **every** man riding a horse?"). This broad range of acceptable responses reduces the bias associated with many standardized tests.

In addition to the expanded range of acceptable responses, the DELV evaluates children's ability to use their language skills to determine the meanings of novel words. An example is, "The girl is suggesting the man to send the ball." "Which was the suggest?" This type of item reflects the principles of dynamic assessment procedures by reducing the assessment of prior language acquisition, and instead evaluating a child's ability to make predictions about meanings based on their understanding of language structure. In other words, it truly assesses underlying language learning *abilities*. The strengths of the DELV, when used as a component of a comprehensive assessment protocol that includes formal and informal measures,

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narrative assessment, and integration of information from more than one setting, can help limit assessment bias for speakers of AAE and other varieties of English.

The importance of our sensitivity to cultural issues as professionals can be illustrated by situations in which the failure to recognize language differences between cultures has led to further over-identification of disabilities. One member of our practice who noted characteristics of AAE in a speech-language report was asked by school directors to remove such terminology from her report, as it was deemed potentially “offensive.” In a separate instance, a member of the Texas Speech-Language Hearing Association (TSHA) Task Force on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity reported that “jaws dropped” at an ARD meeting when she proposed dismissing an African American student from speech-language services because deviations from Standard American English were consistent with the student’s dialect.

These examples demonstrate that opinions on this issue are often controversial. Open, sensitive, professional discussion on cultural differences, as well as attention to best practice, is needed in order to determine what is typical among all of our students with respect to dialect. Our profession can only be judged as successful when concrete numbers finally indicate proportional representation of all students in special education.

TASK FORCE FAVORITES:

One task force member recommends two websites:

www.mla.org/census_map

This website will show you all of the languages spoken in all areas of the country.

“You can zoom in to each area, choose different languages, and the map will show the percentages of population who speak each language.”

www.ethnologue.com/web.asp

Often we get a student or client who speaks a language or dialect we haven’t heard before, or they tell us where they are from but we aren’t familiar with the language or dialect there. One of the first steps in assessment is to research that language and country to find out as much as possible. This website is a great starting place. You can find the language or dialect and a little bit about it, which will help as you search other websites for specific information. “This is a ‘catalog’ of languages in the world. It doesn’t give phonemic inventories or some other details of each language, but we can choose the area (e.g. Africa), choose a country (e.g., Nigeria), and it will show the languages spoken there.”

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The Hanen Centre has always been a leader and innovator in providing training and support materials for speech-language pathologists involving families in language intervention. The Hanen approach has had a tremendous influence on my work with children and families.

Barry Prizant, PhD
Director, Childhood Communication Services, Cranston, RI
Adjunct Professor, Brown University Centre for the Study of Human Development