Script for “Should I refer this bilingual student for a speech-language evaluation?”

[This script accompanies the presentation “Should I Refer this Bilingual Student for a Speech-Language Evaluation]. It is meant as a guide for speech-language pathologists who want to share information about bilingual speech and language development with their teachers to help with the referral process. Please feel free to adjust it to meet your needs!---Ellen Kester]

This is for all of your teachers and speech-language pathologists, and English as a Second Language Teachers out there who have students from diverse backgrounds in your classrooms.

We hear so frequently that research shows that children from diverse backgrounds get over-referred for evaluations and over-identified for special education services. We don’t want to contribute to the problem of putting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds into special education programs when they don’t belong there. At the same time, we want to be sure that our students have all of the supports they need to achieve their maximum potential in the classroom. I created this X-minute presentation to help you know which students to refer for speech-language evaluations, and which ones not to.

Let’s walk through some examples. We’ll start with Spanish and English, since that is the most common combination that we encounter in the U.S.

2- The big question here is, “Are the patterns I am worried about due to an influence from the student’s native language OR are they due to a speech or language impairment?”

3- We’re going to start by talking about speech sounds and how to look for normal cross-linguistic patterns in bilingual children. After that we will talk about language patterns and the ways syntax (or word order), morphology (pre-fixes and suffixes like plural markers and verb tenses), semantics (vocabular and word choices), and pragmatics (social language) can be influenced by the languages a student speaks.

Let’s start with speech sounds. In order to know whether we should be concerned about how a student produces the sounds of a language, we need to know what sounds are shared between their native language and the language they are in the process of acquiring. For those who are simultaneous bilinguals, we need to know what sounds exist in the student’s two languages. The reason we need to know this is because the sounds of one language influence the other language, and vice versa.

We use a Venn diagram to help us see the similarities and differences. The sounds in the middle of the Venn diagram exist in both languages. The sounds on either side exist in only one of their languages.

4- Using the Venn diagram here, we use L1 to represent the student’s home language and L2 to represent the student’s second language.

5- If the student does not produce sounds the way a monolingual speaker of L1 does for the sounds that are unique to L2, this is most likely due to an influence from the student's native language.

6- If, however, the sounds occur on shared sounds and sounds unique to the student's native language, this could be due to a speech disorder, and it would be a good idea to refer this student for special education services.

7- Here we have a Venn diagram containing the consonant phonemes of English and Spanish. The symbols are from the International Phonetic Alphabet. Let's first walk through the 4 consonant phonemes that exist in Spanish but not English. We have the ñ, like in the word piña colada, the trilled r, like in the name Ramon, the flap /r/ that is similar to the sound in the middle of the word "butter" with a tap of the tongue tip on the alveolar ridge, and finally the beautiful glottal fricative [x] like in the Spanish word "jabon," which means soap.

Next, we'll focus our attention to the middle of the diagram, where most of the symbols should look familiar to you. I'll bring your attention to the t with the long s next to it. This represents the "ch" sound. The sound after it is the letter "j" but it represents "y" and then finally, let's's talk about the /w/ with an asterisk next to it. We put that in the middle of the Venn diagram but the sound "w" is produced slightly differently in English and Spanish. In English, we round our lips, in Spanish it starts as more of a velar approximant and then moves to rounded lips.

Now let's move to the right side of the Venn diagram, which contains the 10 consonant phonemes of English that do not exist in Spanish. As educators of children who speak home languages other than English, these are very important sounds for us. The reason is that they are the sounds that will be most challenging to our students who are in the process of learning English. They might substitute sounds from their language that are similar to these sounds, they might omit the sounds, or they might produce them differently than you expect them to. When they do these things, they are exhibiting NORMAL processes of cross-linguistic influence. These patterns are not indicative of a speech or language disorder, or a reading disorder, or writing difficulties. These are normal bilingual processes. Our job in the general education classroom is to highlight these differences for them as they acquire their new language.

8- This is a diagram of a student who was referred for a speech-language evaluation and did not qualify. He was a 6 year, 4 months old native Spanish speaker in the process of learning English. He made errors on 5 sounds that existed in English but not Spanish and one sound, the flap r, of Spanish. He produced the flap r in error 50% of the time, which suggests it is an emerging sound. He was also able to repeat it in sounds and phrases. This was not a child who had a speech disorder.

9- This is a diagram of a student who was referred for a speech-language evaluation and DID qualify for services. Do you see the difference here? This student made errors on consonant phonemes in all three areas of the Venn diagram. She had high levels of errors on these sounds and had difficulty in trial therapy, or dynamic assessment, when we taught the sounds.

10- While Spanish is the second language that most of us encounter more than other languages, the process is the same for other languages. We just need to know which sounds are in common to English and the students home language/s, and which sounds are unique to one language or the other. Here you'll note that Vietnamese does not have the voiced or unvoiced "th" sounds of the words "that" or "think," the "j" in "judge," "sh" as in "share," "v" as in "value," "ʒ," in "measure," or the rhotic, or rounded "r" of English, as in the word "red."

11- Mandarin has a different set of sounds that exist in English but not Mandarin. So you can see how important it is to have the information about which sounds are shared and which ones aren't.

12- It's also the case that sometimes sounds exist in the student's home language but don't exist in certain word positions. An example of this is found in Spanish, where only 5 consonant phonemes can occur at the ends of words. Thus, even though "t" exists in Spanish, it cannot occur at the end of Spanish words. A pattern that we often see students use in these cases is a substitution of a sound that can occur at the ends of words in their language. A native Spanish speaker might substitute "d" for "t" in word final position because it is the closest thing in their repertoire. This might make the word "mat" sound more like "mad."

13- These rules about how sounds can go together and where they can occur in words are called Phonotactic Constraints. Phonotactic Constraints include things like what sounds can occur at the beginnings and ends of words, what sounds can be put together in a cluster, whether clusters can be used, and how many syllables can be strung together. In the Difference or Disorder Book and in the World Language Library, you'll find a section on the Phonotactic Constraints for each language.

14- All of the details we've discussed thus far are related to speech and sound production. Let's now shift gears and think about language. Two realms of language that we think about with our students are Receptive Language, or how well the student understands or comprehends language, and Expressive Language, or how well the student expresses their ideas and needs.

We can break each of these areas down further to think about the Content of Language, which we refer to as semantic language. This includes vocabulary, understanding word meanings, understanding the relationships between words, the ability to categorize objects, and so forth. Next is Language Form, which includes syntax and morphology, or how we put words together to form sentences, and how we use prefixes and suffixes, like plural markers, to add details and meaning to root words.

15- Emergent bilinguals who are in the earlier stages of exposure to the English language may not understand everything in classroom lessons. Often they do not announce this either. There are a lot of strategies that have been found to support those who are in the process of acquiring the language of the classroom, including repetition, slowed rate, visual supports, checking for understanding, pre-teaching vocabulary, and peer support. If the student continues to have difficulty after regular and sustained implementation of these strategies, a referral for an evaluation is appropriate.

16- We break Expressive Language down into four components—Syntax, Morphology, Semantics, and Pragmatics. All of these areas can be heavily influenced by a student's home language and culture. We'll start with Syntax, or the way we string words together.

Different languages have different word order. If our student is using a word order that is different than English, find out what the word order is in their native language. If that's what they are using, that is an indication of cross-linguistic influence but not of a language disorder.

If the student is dropping the subject at the beginning of a sentence, check to see if that is permitted in their language. That is often referred to as a pro-drop language.

The bottom line is that if the patterns they are using are consistent with their home language, that is a very normal part of the process of learning a second language.

17- The same thing is true in the area of Morphology. Morphological markers include prefixes and suffixes. Plural markers often vary across languages. In English, we add "s" most of the time to mark a plural. In Spanish, we add "s" or "es," depending on whether the root word ends in a vowel or a consonant. Some languages mark plurals at the beginning of a word, and some languages do not attach anything to a word to indicate a plural but instead describe plurality in different ways. So, while struggling to mark plurals in English might be a concern for a monolingual English speaker, it's only a concern for an emergent bilingual if the plural marking system of their native language is highly similar to English.

Verb systems vary a lot across languages, and as a result, we often see children use the simplest form of the verb as they are figuring out how that system works. I'm sure those of you who have learned a second language remember the challenges of learning all of the verb conjugations of the new language.

One other example of morphological differences across languages is the marking of possession. In English we use "-'s" to mark possession. Many Latin languages use the syntactic structure "X of Y" to mark possession, such as, "the brush of Marie."

These are just a few examples. What is important to note is that if a student is producing patterns that are not consistent with English, we need to explore what those patterns look like in their native language before making a referral for a special education evaluation. We can explore together to be sure we are doing best by our students.

18- Now let's move to Semantic Language, the meaning system. Here are some things we know about how bilinguals learn and use words:

- Circumstantial bilinguals (those who are learning two languages because their circumstances require it) often learn different words in their two languages. Different words are used at home, at school and in the community. As a result, sometimes they will not know a word in the language they are using and they'll borrow from the other languages. That is perfectly normal.
- Research tells us that children may use words with similar meanings when they don't have the correct word in their repertoire (e.g. "horse" for "mule").
- Children with language disorders tend to use non-specific words instead.
- When we measure word learning in bilinguals, we have to consider both languages.

19- Pragmatics is the final area of Expressive Language we will focus on. Here, it is important to know that the social customs that you have learned are not the same across languages. In some languages it is considered disrespectful to make eye contact "superiors," such as teachers and professors. In other cultures children do not initiate interactions with unfamiliar adults. There is a wide range of cultural customs. Before making a referral for a communication evaluation, understand what the norms are in the students home culture.

20-22- The next three slides give examples from the Difference or Disorder book about different aspects of language in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Mandarin, exploring things like word order, plural marking, use of pronouns, use of articles, and formulation of questions. These are just snippets that we can look at in some of the more common languages we see in our school. These give us some ideas about what to be aware of when we have concerns about student who is an emergent bilingual.

23- Thank you for allowing me this time with you today. I know we all have the same goal of serving our students in the best way possible. There has been a decades-long problem of bilingual students being over-referred for special education evaluations and over-represented in special education programs. We can work together to solve this problem in our school.