

BILINGUISTICS

When Standard Scores Don't Tell the Whole Story

Advocating for Fair Assessment of Bilingual Students in Developmental Delay Eligibility

The Problem

Many states acknowledge that standardized tests are not always appropriate for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, yet eligibility procedures still depend on them. SLPs often face pressure to include standard scores even when the norms do not represent bilingual children. This guide helps you advocate for valid and ethical assessment practices.

Key Professional Statements to Quote

Source	Quote	Citation
ASHA Practice Portal – Multilingual Service Delivery	A standardized score obtained from a norm-referenced test that is not valid for a bilingual child should not be used for eligibility determination.	ASHA, 2023
IDEA §300.304(b)	Assessment tools and strategies must be used for purposes for which the assessments or measures are valid and reliable.	U.S. Dept. of Education
Kester & Peña (2022)	Eligibility decisions should rely on converging evidence from multiple data sources rather than norm-referenced tests alone.	Bilingualism White Paper on CLD Assessment

How to Justify Your Report (Use This Language)

Due to the student's bilingual background and the lack of appropriate bilingual norms for this measure, standard scores were not used to determine eligibility. Instead, the decision is based on converging evidence from dynamic assessment, narrative analysis, and functional communication data consistent with IDEA and ASHA guidelines.

Using invalid standardized scores risks both over- and under-identification of bilingual children and does not meet psychometric or ethical standards for fair assessment.

Acceptable Alternatives to Standard Scores

Type of Evidence	Example	Use
Language Sample Analysis	Compare MLU, grammatical errors, and story structure to bilingual norms	Functional expressive language
Dynamic Assessment	Teach–retest model with mediated learning	Measures learning potential
Parent & Teacher Interviews	BESA or Bilingual Input–Output Survey	Functional communication and exposure
Narrative Retells	Frog Story or classroom storybooks	Identifies discourse and vocabulary development

Quick Talking Points for Eligibility Meetings

- Validity trumps policy — IDEA requires valid, reliable measures.
- A 1.5 SD cut-off applies only when the score is valid for the child’s population.
- Bilingual development follows a different trajectory; narrative and dynamic data reveal delay more accurately.
- We’re using converging evidence rather than a single number.

References (MLA)

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Multilingual Service Delivery in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology. 2023.

U.S. Department of Education. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 34 CFR §300.304. 2004.

Kester, Ellen, and Scott Prath. “Difference or Disorder: Understanding Language Development in Bilingual Children.” *Bilingualism*, 2022.

Peña, Elizabeth D., et al. “Dynamic Assessment and the Identification of Language Impairment in Bilingual Children.” *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2016, pp. 983–998.