



Stories of assessment: Spanish–English bilingual children's agency and interactional competence in oral language assessments



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 26 November 2014

Keywords:

Bilingual children
Language assessment
Interactional competence
Agency
Sociocultural linguistics
Interactional analysis

ABSTRACT

Prompted by a concern that the cognitivist orientation and monolingual biases of current language assessment practices may unwittingly perpetuate deficit perspectives on language minority children, this paper examines the linguistic, interactional, and identity resources that Spanish–English bilingual children used to co-construct interactional competence in narrative-based speaking assessments with bilingual researcher-assessors. Insights from sociocultural linguistics guided our close interactional analyses of three assessment excerpts, which we discuss in their ethnographic context by drawing on interview and observational data from our 18-month study. Our analysis demonstrates that children were able to create space for agency, bilingualism, and interaction even in assessments that assumed passive, monolingual, and monologic participation. We discuss implications of these findings for research and education, arguing that language assessment needs to be reconceptualized in ways that account for children's interactional competence and agency.

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Introduction

Matthew, Sofia, and Ariel,¹ children of Mexican immigrants living in southern California, navigate and create multiple languages, cultures, and worlds as they go about their everyday lives. At home in her free time, Sofia writes a story about a blanket in English and a song about the moon in Spanish. During group work with her classmates, Ariel code-switches as she whispers to a friend, “Oh my gosh, todos ya tienen dos papeles!” (*everyone already has two pages*). At the dinner table, Matthew responds in English when his mother asks him in Spanish about his school day.

In many senses, they and other emergent bilingual children like them live in “simultaneous worlds” (Kenner, 2004), breaking down putative boundaries between worlds and languages. Yet their experiences as young language brokers and interpreters (Orellana, 2008; Valdés, 2003), as skillful code-switchers (Zentella, 1997), and as mediators who straddle different linguistic and cultural worlds (Orellana, 2008) tend to go unrecognized by language proficiency assessments for various reasons. First, assessments of language proficiency are overwhelmingly based on monolingual constructs of language (Shohamy, 2013) and often require bilingual students to perform as two monolinguals in one (García & Baetens Beardsmore, 2009). Furthermore, as Valdés and Figueroa (1994) point out, language assessment practices do not always account for

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¹ All names of participants in this study are pseudonyms.

differences between various types of bilingualism: for example, despite fundamental differences between *elective bilinguals* (i.e., those who choose to learn an additional language, usually in academic contexts) and *circumstantial bilinguals* (i.e., those who are obliged by circumstances such as immigration to become bilingual and usually do so through informal learning), the same language proficiency measures tend to be used for both groups, and the question of instrument selection and appropriateness for circumstantial bilinguals has been largely ignored. Finally, the language testing field in general has a strong cognitive bias, which often obscures the sociocultural contexts and consequences of language assessments (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Current assessment practices thus represent challenges for researchers and educators who seek a sociocultural understanding of bilingual children's linguistic development and interactional competencies, and these practices may even be detrimental insofar as they perpetuate deficit perspectives by measuring bilingual children against a monolingual yardstick.

To shed light on a broader range of bilingual children's abilities than are typically captured by cognitive approaches to assessment, in this analysis we examine how children co-construct interactional competence with assessors as they negotiate what Shohamy (2013) calls the discourses of power that are present in oral language assessments. Guided by insights from sociocultural linguistics (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), our interactional analysis focuses on examples from the narrative-based oral language assessments of Matthew, Sofia, and Ariel, three of 12 Spanish–English bilingual children who participated in a larger longitudinal study on bilingual language development and heritage language maintenance (see Lee, Kang, Jeong, Lopez, & Fernandez, 2010). Understanding language as a social practice and a form of action (see, e.g., van Lier & Walqui, 2012), and viewing children as competent social actors in their own right (Thorne, 2001), we ask how children draw on an ensemble of resources to negotiate their participation and co-construct interactional competence in assessment interactions with bilingual assessors.

Discourse analysis and research on oral language assessment of bilingual children

The substantial body of discourse-analytic and conversation-analytic language assessment literature that has emerged over the last several decades has lent much insight into how participation is discursively managed in speaking assessment situations (see, e.g., Brown, 2003; He & Young, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Lazaraton, 2002; Simpson, 2006). However, most of this discourse-analytic work has focused on adolescent or adult language learners. Little is known about how younger language learners negotiate oral assessment interactions, a situation which suggests that a view of children as less competent social actors or as “less complete versions of [adults]” (Thorne, 2001, p. 10) in some ways continues to inform the questions researchers ask about language assessment of bilingual children.

Research on children's language assessment has tended to view discourse in isolation from its interactional and ethnographic contexts, reflecting what many scholars have recognized as the cognitive bias of the language testing field (McNamara & Roever, 2006) and of the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Applied Linguistics in general (see, e.g., Atkinson, 2011). Because of the centrality of narrative across cultures and languages, the methods used to assess bilingual children for these cognitively oriented studies typically include storytelling or story retelling activities based on videos or wordless picture books (e.g., Muñoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehnle, 2003). Mayer's (1969) frog picture book series and adaptations thereof (e.g., Sánchez, 2006) are especially popular. Once a story retell has been elicited, children's discourse is analyzed (often quantitatively) with attention to linguistic or narrative features that have been found to be significant for children's linguistic development, including: linguistic productivity measures, such as total number of different words (e.g., Muñoz et al., 2003; Uccelli & Pérez, 2007); grammaticality or sentence organization measures, such as percentage of grammatically acceptable utterances (e.g., Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Muñoz et al., 2003); and narrative complexity measures, such as specific aspects of story grammar (e.g., Fiestas & Peña, 2004; Heilmann, Miller, & Nockerts, 2010; Lofranco, Peña, & Bedore, 2006).

A second notable tendency in the literature on children's language assessment is a monolingual, native-speaker bias, a bias which, as Shohamy (2013) argues, is apparent in the language testing field in general. The literature on bilingual children's oral language assessment can be said to reflect this bias in that it often does not address whether or how children draw on both their languages while being tested in one. If children's use of the “nontarget” language is addressed, it is often characterized as representing “child errors” and/or is excluded altogether from analyses of assessment discourse (e.g., Heilmann et al., 2010; Uccelli & Pérez, 2007). Even in studies that have characterized instances of code-switching as “acceptable dialect forms” (e.g., Fiestas & Peña, 2004), oftentimes no attention is given to what kinds of semantic and/or interactional work children's fluid language practices may be accomplishing.

All the studies described above have certainly increased scholarly understanding of various aspects of children's language abilities, but given the predominance of cognitive orientations and the monolingual biases in this body of literature, many aspects of these children's bilingual language practices and interactional competencies in assessment situations have remained largely unexplored. In recognition of this gap, the present study builds on previous discourse-analytic work that focuses on issues such as identity and positioning in the assessment of older language learners (e.g., Lazaraton & Davis, 2008; Simpson, 2006) as well as on a small number of studies that offer alternative perspectives on assessment interactions involving bilingual children, such as Valdés, Capitelli, and Alvarez (2011) discourse analysis of Latina/o children's and examiners' participation in English language proficiency assessments. At the same time as building on such work, we also go in a rather different direction by turning attention to data that has heretofore typically been discarded as analytical scraps: moments in which children and assessors engage in a kind of assessment metadiscourse as they negotiate their participation in the assessment activity. We believe that such a focus helps illuminate children's understandings of the assessment situation

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