

Working with an Interpreter to Analyze a Language Sample

SLPs often work with interpreters to conduct an assessment of a child’s home language when the SLP does not speak that language. Language sampling in the two languages of bilingual children has become a core component of a comprehensive language assessment (Rojas & Iglesias, 2009). The following is a sample list of questions to ask an interpreter when analyzing language samples.

This list of questions is not meant to be exhaustive. The overall goal is to identify a starting set of questions related to language sample analysis that may help gather more specific information from interpreters as part of a bilingual language assessment. A secondary goal is to spark discussion among SLPs in order to generate additional lists of questions for interpreters for other activities related to assessment or treatment.

Consistent with the guidelines proposed by Langdon and Cheng (2002) for working with interpreters, the SLP would identify and train the interpreter before the assessment as well as schedule a debriefing session to analyze the sample afterwards. The interpreter or bilingual paraprofessional would need to have training in eliciting and transcribing language samples in order to create the written transcript in the child’s home language. Detailed instructions on how to elicit, audio-record, and transcribe a language sample using SALT software can be found in freely available online tutorials at www.saltsoftware.com.

Ideally, the SLP would elicit, transcribe, and analyze the English language sample and would supervise the interpreter to collect the sample of the child’s home language. Note that although the SLP may gain important information in observing interactions between the child and interpreter, the SLP may want to observe from a distance so as not to disrupt direct interactions between the interpreter and child that are taking place in the child’s home language (i.e., the child may be reluctant to speak the home language in the presence of the SLP).

INSTRUCTIONS: Look at the written transcript together with the interpreter. Have the audio file available if needed. Remember that the interpreter may not have a background in speech-language pathology or linguistics. Try to ask specific questions and provide many examples. Also ask for examples from the interpreter to better understand the child’s language patterns. Note: the following questions do not require an English translation of the language sample in the child’s home language as interpreters may not have time to translate transcripts into English. If you would like to have an English translation, one idea is to request the electronic version of the transcript in the child’s home language prior to the meeting, and copying and pasting the text into www.translate.google.com to get a general English translation.

General Questions

- Was there anything odd or unusual that you noticed when interacting with this child? Can you give me an example?
- Was the child able to follow your verbal instructions? Did the child seem confused at any point? Can you give me an example?
- Was the child able to focus on the activity? Did the child need to be redirected?
- Do you have experience working with children who speak the same home language and are of similar age? If so, how does this child compare to other children of the same age who speak the same home language?

Relation to the English sample (to be tailored to the specific transcript).

- In the English sample, the child shows these types of errors. Could any of these English errors be related to the child’s home language? For example...
 - The child is making mistakes with English pronouns such as “he” and “she”. Are there pronouns in the home language?
 - The child is omitting the subject in English sentences. Instead of saying “The dog ran down the street”, s/he said “Ran down the street”. In the child’s home language, is it possible to omit the subject of sentences or would this be considered an error?

- The child is omitting word endings on verbs that indicate past tense. Instead of saying “Yesterday, he walked to the park”, the child says “Yesterday, he walk to the park”. Does the child’s home language have these types of word endings to indicate actions that have happened in the past?

Language Domains of the Home Language

Vocabulary and Grammar

- Overall, would you say the child says complete sentences or incomplete sentences? An example of a complete sentence in English would be “The dog runs down the street.” An incomplete sentence in English would be “Runs down the street” where the subject is omitted or “Dog run street” where the smaller words such as “the” are omitted.
- Are the words in the correct order? For example, sentences in English usually start with the subject such as “The boy hits the ball” and adjectives come before nouns such as “red ball”. In English, a child that makes an error in word order may say “ball red” or “hits ball boy”.
- Does the child use names of items such as “ball” “dog” “sausage” or does s/he use general words such as “this thing” and “that thing”?
- Let’s go through each line of the sample. Please tell me whether each line sounds correct or if there are any errors/mistakes. Try to ignore mistakes that the child makes in pronouncing words. I’m interested in mistakes related to the child’s grammar or the way s/he connects words to make sentences. [Write 1 or 0 next to each line to calculate grammaticality. Studies with Spanish-English bilinguals show that Spanish grammaticality scores of 80% or greater are indicative of typical development and < 80% may suggest language impairment (e.g., Restrepo, 1998)].
 - Can you show me the child’s mistake in the transcript? How would an adult say this sentence? [Have interpreter write out adult target].
- Are there any patterns of errors that you noticed?

Narrative Structure (Most relevant for school-age children).

- If you were not looking at the pictures and just listening to the child, are you able to understand the child’s story?
- Did the child’s story have a beginning, middle, and end?
- Did the child include important details:
 - Where the story took place? For example, in English, the child said “in the forest”.
 - When the story took place? For example, in English, the child said “one day”.
 - Who was involved in the story? For example, in English, the child “the boy”.
 - The main actions? For example, in English, the child said “The boy ran. Then fell”.

Fluency and Articulation

- Did the child speak fluently or were there many starts and stops such as “um” “uh”?
- Did the child repeat words or phrases? If so, did this happen a lot, throughout the sample?
- Was the child’s speech difficult to understand? If so, can you give me an example?
- Did you notice consistent errors on any specific sounds?”