Title: Constructs and Assessors: Child Language Assessment for A Lower Middle-Income Country Context

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Introduction: The lack of trained diagnostic assessors in Lower-Middle Income Countries (LMIC) often prevents children with disabilities from receiving timely diagnosis and informed intervention plans (Hartley & Newton, 2009). In turn, at the family level, children lack service and appropriate treatment. At the population level, health systems are not prepared to accommodate the needs of children with developmental disabilities (Maulik & Darmstadt, 2007). The impact of a lack of assessors is multiplied by the discordance between LMIC community needs and popular developmental assessment instruments. Many developmental assessments are designed for western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic populations (WEIRD; Henrick et. al., 2010; Hartley & Newton, 2009; Maulik & Darmstadt, 2007) and often adaptation is just translation. The discordance is greater when assessing child language and communication due to the entanglement of language with culture, multilingualism, and linguistic constructs that cannot be simply translated.

This study addresses the need for child language assessment in Guatemala. We aim to overcome barriers common to low-resource settings through community engaged research and a built-in assessor support manual. We additionally will examine how assessments can better incorporate cultural aspects of developmental disability.

Method: First, we interviewed educators using think-aloud, verbal prompts and mock assessment to understand assessment from their perspective. Next we explored the cultural validity of the assessment’s constructs through a structured focus group (a pilot of 5 groups with 4 participants each, followed by a structured focus group n≈30) to explore how the specific Guatemalan cultural context shapes narrative production. Participants generated, defined and ranked general child narrative characteristics. This mixed-methods study draws from Cultural Domain Analysis, Cognitive Interviewing and the Angoff method.

We leveraged our partnership with a non-governmental primary school serving children with special needs in San Gaspar Vivar, Guatemala. This partnership led to the identification of the need for a formalized child language assessment, and subsequently to the adaptation of the Spanish SPELT-3 for this particular school.

Results: We identified child narrative characteristics that are highly valued by the local community, which are not typically captured in U.S.-based narrative assessments. For example, Guatemalan speech therapists emphasized conveying emotion and connecting the listener to the character’s emotions as important characteristics of narratives. We identified mismatch among terminology related to narrative production as well as perspectives on assessment of speech versus language, and how elements of speech production impact narrative production. We found that engaging the local community in our research was key to ensuring construct validity of the instrument for this setting. Local educators were eager to collaborate and use the research process to improve best practices for cross-cultural language assessment.

Discussion: Our focus on a user’s manual for local assessors as a means of capacity building is innovative. Our work is a systematic approach for readily adapting measures into the context of a specific community. We can increase our confidence that a measure is locally appropriate by engaging that community in the adaptation process, particularly in assessing construct validity. Disability is largely a social phenomenon which requires a holistic and flexible service delivery system (Hartley & Newton, 2009) and this process starts with culturally relevant assessment.
Citations:


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