

Navajo Speech and Language Evaluation: Difference vs. Disorder

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case study highlights the importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment of young Navajo/American Indian children and the importance of alternative assessment procedures to support appropriate diagnoses and recommendations. The case also illustrates systemic issues that result in lack of coordinated care, appropriate diagnosis, and lack of American Indian speech-language pathologists who understand linguistic and cultural differences. The case is based on a typical experience when clinicians who are not familiar with the Navajo language perform speech-language evaluations in Navajo-speaking communities.

INTRODUCTION

The background for the case study focuses on: (1) geographic context; (2) cultural and linguistic context; and (3) educational context.

Geographic context. This case study highlights a clinical experience on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. New Mexico is rich in cultural and linguistic diversity, including 22 different federally recognized tribes. The case involves a young Navajo boy who lives on the Navajo reservation with his family. The Navajo reservation is the size of West Virginia and spans into four states, including Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado. The Navajo Nation is one of the largest tribes in the nation.

Cultural and linguistic context. The Navajo Nation has a strong history of retaining its language and culture. Maintaining cultural identity has been associated with the vitality of the native language and cultural practices in Navajo homes and communities. Tribal leaders have advocated for culturally and linguistically responsive teachings in the home and school. Some schools provide instruction in Navajo language and culture. There are Navajo dual language learners who are acquiring various levels of English and Navajo proficiencies on the reservation. The term English Language Learner (ELL) describes children who are not fully proficient in English. English may be the primary language for some children, yet they may not be proficient in it. In this case, understanding dialectal differences or Navajo-influenced English will be helpful in determining whether a Navajo student is exhibiting a speech and/or language disorder.

A brief description of the Navajo language and the influence of Navajo on English provides some background. The Navajo (Diné) language is a branch of Athabaskan language family. Almost 150,000 people still speak the Navajo language (Grimes, 1996). In the Navajo speech community, there are monolingual speakers of both Navajo and the Navajo variety of English as well as the majority of adults who are bilingual, more or less fluent in both languages. The traditional elders are often monolingual speakers of Navajo. Children on the Navajo Nation live in homes where they hear Navajo, English or a combination of both.

Young and Morgan (1987) have described the Navajo language extensively. Their descriptions of the Navajo verb are complex. For example, one unique feature of Navajo is that many meaningful units are compounded together to form a single word, and often elements, such as the subject and object of the verb, aspect, mode, and direction, etc., are embedded in verbs. Within the verb-word there are both derivational and inflectional morphemes. Attached to the end of the verb-word also may be directional and locational morphemes. The morphological markers used in English (i.e., verb tenses) are not used in the same manner. Nouns can be inflected for possession with a personal pronoun prefix (“**shichidí**” “my car” and “**nimá**” “your mother”). Nouns are not generally marked for number. The sentence in Navajo incorporates a SOV (subject-object-verb) word order.

Young and Morgan (1987) have also developed a Navajo Consonant Inventory (standard orthography) which include nasals, laterals, affricates, fricatives, stops, bilabials, alveolars and velars. A unique feature is that some consonant are glottalized including glottalized t’ and k’ (velars) and glottalized ts’ and ch’ (affricates). They also noted that Navajo vowels contrast in length and pitch, and correspond approximately with English /i, e, o, and a/. They describe Navajo phonology, grammar, and syntax extensively, and their work is a valuable resource for speech-language pathologists who wish to understand the Navajo language more in depth.

Linguists such as Leap (1993) have documented linguistic differences and the unique characteristics of the influence of Native American languages on English. The rules that govern phonology, grammar and syntax differs between English and Navajo. Navajo English may include the following examples. Navajo has only a glottal final voiceless stop, so speakers of Navajo English may not distinguish differences in final voiceless stops. They may delete them entirely or substitute one for the other, so “truck” is pronounced “tru?”; “test” is pronounced “tess”; and “mit” is pronounced “mi?”. Leap claims that reduction in consonant clusters is a general feature of American Indian English (Leap, 1982). For example, “cold” is pronounced col”. Navajo has no velar nasal so /n/ replaces /ŋ/ (ng). Speakers of Navajo English say “thin” for “thing” and “walkin” for “walking”. There are many more examples that Leap (1982) provides to illustrate the uniqueness of Navajo influenced English.

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