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Innovative Practices in the Identification of LEP Students

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The development of the paper was rather like *deja vu*. Since 1974, when I entered the public school system as a recent graduate of a Speech Pathology program, I had all the answers ... until I started working with children in a Chapter 1 identified campus in a border town school district. Each year, teachers would refer entire classes to me, and I realized quickly that I did not have the slightest idea how to tell the difference between those in need of Speech Pathology services and those in need of English language development services.

Two decades later, we still wrestle with the same issues, and I submit to you that, given the background of the students now entering the public school system, more and more students will be in need of English language development/Speech Pathology services related to articulation and language disorders, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic background.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe current practices in various states used to identify linguistically different students, provide a review of the literature regarding recommended practices, and offer alternative practices for identifying linguistically different students. The expectation is that the information contained herein can serve multi-fold purposes:

1. provide an information base regarding current identification practices.
2. suggest a way to systematically identify limited English proficient students using multiple criteria; and
3. offer a paradigm that will allow the United States Department of Education and the various state departments of education to collect consistent data regarding the students in need of English language assistance.

Methodology

To this end, in addition to a review of the literature, surveys were mailed to 17 states that provided a geographical representation of the eastern, heartland, and western regions as well as a multilingual and multicultural representation of the 17 states surveyed, 9 responded. These states graciously responded within a two-week time frame which is most deeply appreciated and acknowledged.

The recommendations in the section entitled "Paradigm for Determining English Language Assessment Needs" seeks to incorporate yet expand current practices extant in the various states. The intent is to make

the modification of traditional practices more palatable and pragmatic which will enable practitioners to move toward the use of multiple criteria for identification and assessment of linguistically different students.

Review of Language Assessment Practices in Selected States

The purpose of the survey was to obtain data on the LEP population and the English speaking population by grade level with respect to ethnicity, languages spoken, and program offerings and to examine these data for any relational patterns between the size and the type of the LEP population versus the identification and, assessment practices in the various states.

The limited information received as a result of the survey precluded making any generalizable observations. An attempt to utilize data provided by another national study ([Olson, 1991](#)) yielded some discrepancies between data provided in the report and data provided by some of the states surveyed. Thus, efforts to address the intent of the survey were not very successful.

Sufficient information was provided, however, regarding the identification and assessment practices utilized to make the following observations:

Home Language Surveys (HLS) are used by each of the responding states as the initial screening instrument although the number of items on the HLS varied from state to state. Also, some states, such as New Mexico, use ethnicity as the identification criteria on the HLS and others use languages spoken. Variations in these instruments generate different kinds of information that can be collected regarding LEP populations. One additional factor that may be problematic in using this self-report type of instrument stems from misinformed parents or guardians who feel a need to misrepresent the native language spoken in the home. Such parents often feel that their children will be placed in programs that are not conducive to learning English if they respond truthfully on the HLS.

Standardized Achievement Tests (SATs) are used by every state, however, the cutoff score for identification, and exit criteria, varies between the 23rd percentile and the 40th percentile. This large discrepancy between cutoff scores will significantly impact on the number of LEP students identified per state.

Oral Language Proficiency Tests (OLPTs) are also used by every state although some states, such as New Mexico, limit their recommendations to four specifically listed OLPTs and others, such as Texas, list eight possible options. Inter- and intrastate variations in the OLPTs utilized also contribute to inconsistent identification and data collection practices because there is no correlation between the various instruments.

Some of the states suggest the use of optional criteria and merely list the possibilities, e.g., interviews, observations, and classroom performance, while other states (Louisiana, New Mexico) suggest specific interview techniques or checklists for specific performance behaviors. Regardless of the optional criteria used, the difficulty lies in that there is no apparent means of correlating performance on these alternative measures with their performance on the SATs or the OLPTs.

Additionally, many states allow each school district total autonomy regarding procedures utilized. This factor, coupled with the wide variation in practices, has implications for collecting consistent data regarding the number of LEP students, the kinds of languages spoken, and the level of assistance needed. Further, it makes it extremely difficult to conduct statewide or nationwide research on programs serving LEP students

that will yield consistent, credible, and defensible data for decision makers in the field.

Recommended Integrative Approaches to Language Assessment

In reviewing the states' practices for identifying LEP students, two criteria surfaced repeatedly as being used extensively, although the manner in which these criteria were used varied. These two criteria are the standardized achievement tests and the oral language proficiency tests. Much has been written about the inadequacies of standardized achievement tests and oral language proficiency tests as measures of an individual's proficiency in English ([Canales, 1990](#); [TEA, 1988](#); [Oller, 1973](#)). Regardless of their shortcomings, to date, they have been widely used by the majority of the states as a basis for consistent measurement of students' linguistic performance. Since the 1970s, however, several options have been recommended that would provide practitioners with a more realistic and comprehensive assessment of an individual's English language proficiency ([Canales, 1990](#); [Erickson, 1981](#); [Thonis, 1980](#); [Oller, 1973](#)). Some states reported using these measures, or at least recommending them as optional measures in their state publications.

These optional measures assess language proficiency while a student is engaged in a meaningful speech event. This is known as an *integrative* approach to language assessment because students utilize several communication skills simultaneously. The use of these recommended measures to assess an individual's integrative use of language skills is necessary because, heretofore, primary measures of language assessment, namely SATs and OLPTs, have focused on discreet items of language proficiency, e.g, use of verb tense, use of correct vocabulary term. This process severely limits the amount of information regarding an individual's actual proficiency with a language because language usage:

1. is dynamic and contextually based (varies depending upon the situation, the speakers, and the topic)
2. is discursive (requires connected speech)
3. requires the use of integrative skills to achieve communicative competence.

This definition of language usage is predicated on a socio-linguistic theoretical base suggesting that language is more than just a sum of its discrete parts. The implication then is that language assessment instruments also need to follow a similar theoretical base, a practice that has historically been ignored in traditional language assessment procedures ([Canales, 1990](#)).

Language assessment instruments consistent with this philosophy are known as measures of integrative skills and include observation instruments (rating scales and checklists), interviews, dictation tests, and cloze instruments. A description of each follows.

Observation Instruments

Classroom observations of students interacting in various settings are the basis for determining students' linguistic proficiency. A student's linguistic performance in listening **and** speaking is rated on a five-point scale of proficiency, ranging from non-native speaker of English to proficient speaker of English, for each of the four linguistic subsystems -- graphophonemic (letters/sounds), lexicon (vocabulary), morphology (grammar), and semantics (syntax/meaning) (see [Appendix A & B](#)). These rating scales are completed by the classroom teacher after observing students in various classroom settings. Separate rating scales can also be completed for observations of casual, social interactions, such as playground or cafeteria talk.

Appropriate completion of these rating scales requires that the classroom teacher have an understanding of

the criteria used to rate each of the linguistic subsystems.

The behaviors on the rating scale can also be listed in a checklist format in increasing order of difficulty for ease in scoring and analysis.

Interviews

Structured interviews are developed and administered on an individual basis. Ideally, an examiner should conduct the interview while a language specialist transcribes the examinee's responses, noting the use of the four linguistic subsystems. The advantages of this kind of measure are that it can be individually tailored to the experiences of the examinee and it allows the examiner opportunities to explore an individual's knowledge of the language.

The disadvantages, however, are several. First, it usually requires two people to administer the interview, a skilled interviewer and a language specialist. Second, this interview scenario has the potential to distract the examinee and perhaps contribute to diminished responses because of intimidation, especially for young children. Third, individualized administration makes it a time-consuming procedure. Finally, without appropriate scaling criteria, interviews are unsuitable for widespread use in schools as a tool for identification and placement of students.

Dictation Tests

The examinee listens to text dictated from graded material and writes down what is heard. The premise for this measure of integrative skills is that the individual needs to have knowledge of the four linguistic subsystems in order to convert speech to print. The use of dictation tests is advantageous because they:

- are easily developed from material used in everyday classroom situations such as basal readers, science books, or social studies books;
- can be administered in a group setting; and
- do not require extensive specialized training to develop or administer.

The few disadvantages of dictation tests, which can occur in the administration phase and the scoring phase, are manageable if the examiner is aware of them. First, an examiner's dialectal differences may cause difficulties in transcribing speech to print, a problem that could be overcome by using a taped version of the dictation. A related problem, students' lack of familiarity with this type of test, can be mitigated with practice sessions prior to the **actual** dictation to be used as the measure of language proficiency.

Second, an examinee's unfamiliarity with all of the variations in spelling of English sounds may cause interference for the examinee in converting speech to print, for example, writing "miss is esmith" for "Mrs. Smith," for example. This difficulty can be overcome by having the dictation tests scored by someone who knows the differences between the graphic and phonetic systems of the examinee's native language compared to the system in English.

Third, the dictation test requires that the individual being tested knows how to write and finally, appropriate criteria for scaling need to be developed as in the case of the interviews.

Cloze Instruments

The examinee is asked to complete a readability-graded passage from which words have been omitted at regular intervals (usually every fifth word). The premise of this procedure is that language is highly redundant, with many contextual clues that can inform the examinee of the appropriate missing words if that person has a command of the language being tested. Cloze instruments have been used for many years and validated by reading specialists. Administered and analyzed properly, the results of cloze tests will yield information regarding the examinee's level of facility with the text. Such information is useful in planning for students' instructional needs.

In addition to its instructional orientation, there are many advantages to this procedure. The test can be prepared easily using texts that students use in the classroom, thus making the assessment procedure a functional one. Further, the test can be administered in a group setting and quickly scored. If administered to native English speakers at the same grade level, their scores can serve as a basis of comparison for the non-native speakers' scores. Additionally, the construction, administration, and scoring of the cloze test do not require any extensive specialized training to use correctly.

The difficulty in implementing the use of integrative measures of English language proficiency lies in the lack of

- broad based acceptance with respect to their ease of development and administration,
- understanding of the breadth and depth of their usefulness, and
- standardized procedures for consistently collecting and correlating alternative data on students.

These factors preclude the use of 'integrative measure' data in making uniform decisions regarding the identification, placement, and exit needs of LEP students.

Following is a model for ameliorating this dilemma. The scope of the model, however, exceeds the traditional practice of identification and can be used to make decisions for placement and exit, as well. Use of this model consolidates the gathering of information for practitioners and enables them to make informed decisions regarding the needs of the linguistically different children.

Paradigm for Determining English Language Assistance Needs

The model mentioned above is a comprehensive process that identifies not only students in need of language assistance but the level of assistance needed as well. The process involves a systematic documentation of students' linguistic proficiency in formal and informal settings and academic and non-academic settings. In short, this process generates a profile of a student's needs for language assistance and thus, has been titled the English Language Assistance Needs (ELAN) Profile Chart. The ELAN Profile Chart enables practitioners to document data needed to appropriately meet the instructional needs of students and the programmatic needs of campuses.

There are specific steps that must be addressed prior to implementing the effective use of such a model. These steps include

- identifying **criteria** to be used,
- developing a **Likert rating** scale to accompany each criterion,
- determining the range of scores possible for each **category of need**, and
- designing and implementing the **training** necessary to institutionalize the process.

Specifically, each step entails the following considerations.

Criteria Development

A comprehensive assessment of a student's language assistance need(s) requires that data be gathered in three areas. These three sets of data include non-academic related, oral language proficiency data, social data, and academic data (OSA). In each of these areas local/state education agencies have the flexibility to include as many options as are feasible to be undertaken. The important consideration is that each option be clearly delineated and available to all of the individuals involved to ensure consistency of implementation. Some of the examples of the types of options have been mentioned in the section entitled "Review of Language Assessment Practices in Selected States" and discussed in the section entitled "Recommended Integrative Approaches to Language Assessment." These options, and others, are listed below along with a brief rationale for their utilization.

Oral Language Proficiency Data

Home Language Survey -- This serves as an initial screening and is currently used in many states. It can provide useful information regarding baseline data such as language(s) spoken in the home.

Oral Language Proficiency Test -- These prepackaged instruments provide inexperienced practitioners with baseline data regarding students' linguistic performance albeit minimal data.

Oral Language Interview Instruments -- These instruments enable interviewers to probe for information not readily accessible through pen and paper tests.

Observation Instruments -- Provide detailed, comprehensive data on students as they engage in actual speech events which minimize the intimidation factor present in other testing situations.

Social Data

Socio-Economic Status (SES) -- An often disregarded criterion, the SES of a student can offer valuable information regarding the amount of oral/aural stimulation received in the home. Typically, children from low to mid SES home environments are not likely to have

- engaged in much dialogue,
- been read to by their parents,
- or experienced summer camps, organized sports, or other similar experiences that help develop linguistic skills.

Schooling Experience -- This, too, is an often disregarded criterion. Information gained can inform practitioners about the possible level of skills learned in a formal school setting. If these skills are not continuously developed or are developed in a country other than that of the target community, students will need additional intervention services.

Observation Data -- This information obtained from the home and other social settings such as the playground, the cafeteria, etcetera can validate, or confirm, other data gathered.

Academic Data

Achievement Test -- Standardized achievement tests have been a primary source of data used by many states. As mentioned previously, however, the cut off score for eligibility has varied from state to state. Many states also use state-specific standardized tests. Unless these instruments are administered at each grade level, such instruments will not provide consistent data and, thus, are not recommended for use as criteria.

Cloze Test -- Used by many states, such instruments provide useful data regarding the students' language proficiency level with classroom text information that is the basis for participation and promotion in the schooling process. Its ease of administration and scoring make it a valuable criterion for consideration.

Six Weeks Grades -- This criterion provides formative data on students' performance and is the primary criterion used for promotion. The mean should be monitored during each six weeks across subject areas and the mean for the first five of the six weeks should be used as one of the criteria for assessing English language assistance needs. Individual school agencies need to establish specific subject areas to include in the mean.

Observation Data -- Checklists or rating scales utilizing specific performance criteria can provide information regarding students' use of language in contextual situations.

While the number of criteria suggested above may seem unreasonable, multiple data are necessary to develop a consistent and defensible process for documenting the identification, placement, and progress of LEP students and the benefit of effective programs needed to serve them.

Likert Rating Scale Development

The second necessary step in the process is the development of a rating scale for each criterion to be included in the ELAN Profile Chart (see [Appendix 0](#)). A five-point scale is recommended to provide consistency across sites using a similar procedure. Following are examples of suggested scales as well as brief rationales/explanations for the descriptors accompanying each rating.

Home Language Survey

- 1 -- Only Native Language Spoken
- 2 -- Mostly Native Language Spoken
- 3 -- Native and English Languages Spoken
- 4 -- Mostly English Spoken
- 5 -- Only English Spoken

Most of the home language surveys presently used by state or local education agencies ask three to eight questions that would yield this information. Examples of some of the questions include,

- Which language did your child first learn to speak?
- What language does your child use most often at home?
- What language do you most often use to speak to your child?
- What language does the father speak to his child most of the time?

- What language does the child speak to his/her father most of the time?
- What language does the mother speak to her child most of the time?
- What language does the child speak to his/her mother most of the time?
- What language does your child speak to his/her brothers and sisters most of the time?
- What language does your child speak to his/her friends most of the time?

Oral Language Proficiency Instrument

- 1 -- Non-English Speaker
- 2 -- Extremely Limited English Proficiency
- 3 -- Limited English Proficiency
- 4 -- Near Native-Like English Proficiency
- 5 -- Fluent English, Native-Like Proficiency

The descriptors for this scale reflect those found in OLPTs adopted for state use. Each descriptor has a range of possible scores based on the students' performance on the test.

Oral Language Interview Instrument

- 1 -- 80 - 100 percent Native Language Responses
- 2 -- 50 - 79 percent Native Language Responses
- 3 -- < 50 percent in either Language
- 4 -- 50 - 79 percent English Language Responses
- 5 -- 80 - 100 percent English Language Responses

This scale can be applied to any interview instrument regardless of the number of items contained therein. While specific response criteria is not provided, the expectation is that the interviewer will have been appropriately trained to score acceptable responses.

Observation Data

- 1 -- Pre-Production Stage
- 2 -- Early Production Stage
- 3 -- Speech Emergence Stage
- 4 -- Intermediate Stage
- 5 -- Fluent Stage

These are widely used labels for the various stages of language development (references). Specific behaviors relevant to each of the stages can be found in [Appendix C](#).

Socio-Economic Status

- 1 -- < \$5,000
- 2 -- \$5,000 - 10,000
- 3 -- 10,000 - 25,000
- 4 -- 25,000 - 35,000
- 5 -- 35,000 - 45,000

These ranges are partially arbitrarily based on the qualifications for free and reduced lunch as well as a general approximation of the relative cost of meeting the basic needs of a family versus the affordability of "frills."

(Note: Perhaps a more precise scale can be determined using the current Poverty Level Index that considers the number of family members versus the income.)

Schooling Experience

- 1 -- No Previous Schooling or All English Program Only
- 2 -- Interrupted Schooling/Some ESL Instruction
- 3 -- Schooling in Other Countries
- 4 -- ESL program only since entering U.S. school system
- 5 -- Bilingual education program only since entering U.S. school system

This factor is critical to successful participation in the academic setting. Students with little or no previous formal schooling experiences or students placed in inappropriate programs will be in need of extensive linguistic and cultural education services.

Observation Data (Home, with friends)

- 1 -- Uses native language ONLY in all settings
- 2 -- Relies on native language in all settings
- 3 -- Uses the native language sparingly in all settings
- 4 -- Uses the English language with friends only
- 5 -- Uses the English language mostly in all settings

Knowledge of language use in various settings can also indicate the possible level of proficiency with respect to vocabulary development.

Standardized Achievement Data

- 1-- < 20 %ile
- 2 -- 20-29 %ile
- 3 -- 30-40 %ile
- 4 -- 41-59 %ile
- 5 -- 60-80 %ile

The distribution of percentile points for each rating decreases from 20 to 9 because of the critical need to have a command of the language in order to perform well on these tests, recognizing of course that knowledge of the English language is not the only critical factor central to performing well on these measures. It should be noted that the ratings of 1 and 2 exceed the maximum cut-off scores found in states with large populations of linguistically different students, however, this type of scale can provide consistency in identification data and is thus presented as such.

Cloze Test

- 1 -- Raw Score of 0 - 20
- 2 -- Raw Score of 21 - 30
- 3 -- Raw Score of 31 - 40
- 4 -- Raw Score of 41 - 49
- 5 -- Raw Score of 50

Cloze measures can be statewide versions based on state adopted texts or local versions. Decisions will need to be made regarding which content areas to include as cloze texts.

Six Weeks Grades

- 1 -- $< = 59$
- 2 -- 60's
- 3 -- 70's
- 4 -- 80's
- 5 -- 90's

The six weeks grades for each of the content areas can be used as a formative measure to monitor additional needs for English language assistance. The mean of the six weeks grades for the first five six weeks, either for individual subject areas or across subject areas, is recommended to assist decision makers in the early identification of students in need of English language assistance for the subsequent school year. Subject areas to be considered for determining this mean should at least include Language Arts, Science, and Social Studies given the language demands of the disciplines.

Observation Data by Grade Level and Subject Area

- 1 -- Points, identifies
- 2 -- Names, lists
- 3 -- Describes, tells (simply)
- 4 -- Compares, describes (more complex)
- 5 -- Analyzes, synthesizes

Linguistic information obtained as students engage in academic work can be particularly insightful for making programmatic decisions for these students. This information can be obtained using checklists or rating instruments once the desired behaviors have been identified (see [Appendices D-L](#)).

The ratings for each criterion presented above can easily be recorded in sample charts provided in the Appendix section of this paper. [Appendix M](#) illustrates an Individual English Language Assistance Needs Profile Chart and [Appendix N](#) illustrates a Campus Language Assistance Needs Profile Chart for use in recording the pertinent data.

In some instances, decisions will need to be made regarding missing data or non-applicable data. Suggested for use are "M" for data that is **M**issing and "O" for data that is not applicable, so that it will not get factored into the total count. Comments about why the descriptors were not applicable would be helpful in informing future users of the data and alerting them to changes which may need to be made. This procedure will ensure consistency in and utility of data collected.

Distribution of Scores by Category of Need

Once the criteria and the ratings have been determined, the next step involves the distribution of the number of points possible into each of the categories of needs -- Beginning, Intermediate, Advanced. Given the descriptors attached to each rating, the greater the number of points accumulated per child, the greater the child's proficiency in the English language. In contrast, the fewer the number of points accumulated for each child, the greater the demand for English language assistance. This inverse relationship between points accumulated versus need is consistent with current practices in the various states. Such that, if students are at a "Level 3," they are at the advanced, near proficiency stage, and if they are at a "Level 1," their proficiency in English is virtually non-existent. To further illustrate this point, if 11 criteria are selected to include in the ELAN Profile Chart as suggested above, then the greatest number of points would equal 55 [5 (rating) x 11 (criteria)] and the least number of points possible would equal 11 [1 (rating) x 11 (criteria)]. An individual student can total less than 11 points if there are some data that are Not Applicable (see Note below). An example, of the distribution of points is provided below.

34 - 55.....Advanced Stage (Total possible if student scores all 5s or some 5s & 4s)

23 - 33.....Intermediate Stage (Total possible if student scores all 3s or some 3s and 2s)

00 - 22.....Beginning Stage (Total possible if student scores all 2s or 1s)

[NOTE: A score of 0-10 might be possible if there were missing data. If the criterion was important enough to include, decision makers may want to monitor the student's performance until the necessary additional information is available.]

As with every process conceptualized for wide use, certain realities, such as lack of resources, often preclude the comprehensive and extensive use of recommended procedures. In those instances, the following alternative is offered:

1. Deduct five points per criterion omitted from the overall total and adjust the totals in the three categorical levels accordingly.

55.....Total in example (11 criteria)

-5.....Oral language interview

-5.....Observation Data (Social)

45.....New Total for 9 criteria

28 - 45.....Advanced (Scored all 5s or some 5s & 4s)

19 - 27.....Intermediate (Scored all 3s or some 3s and 2s)

00 - 18.....Beginning (Scored all 2s or 1s, and possibly some 0s)

2. Add five points for each criterion included to the overall total and adjust the three categorical levels accordingly.

55.....Total in example (11 criteria)

+5.....State-wide test administered at each grade level

60.....New Total for 12 criteria

- 37 - 60.....Advanced (Scored all 5s or some 5s, 4s, & 3s)
 25 - 36.....Intermediate (Scored all 3s or some 3s and 2s)
 00 - 24.....Beginning (Scored all 2s or 1s, and possibly some 0s)

If the school records of students are unavailable due to high mobility factors or recent immigrant status, then certain criteria may be selected in order to identify language assistance needs upon the student's arrival. For example, the Home Language Survey, the Oral Language Proficiency Test, the Previous Schooling, and the Oral Interview data can all be obtained readily. The distribution of scores would then be adjusted accordingly so that decisions regarding need and placement could be made. This would ensure that the student received appropriate services pending the arrival or attainment of additional information such as SAT scores or grades.

Advantages of the ELAN Profile Chart

Although at first glance, the process may seem cumbersome, the ELAN Profile Chart has many potential advantages. Some of these advantages include:

- **Teacher judgment** is systematically documented.
- **Comprehensive information** regarding a student's language proficiency is uniformly documented and available for use by teachers or parents.
- **Needs assessment** can be conducted during end of the year LPAC meetings which, in turn, can facilitate student and faculty assignments for successive years.
- **Consistency** in the identification process is possible in that the categorization of English Assistance Needs levels are based on Likert scale totals with corresponding points of distribution regardless of the number of criterion used.
- **Autonomy and flexibility** in the criteria to be utilized remain a viable option for the state and local education agencies yet enable the United States Department of Education and the state education agencies, respectively, to collect data on the number of students in need of language assistance.
- **Identification, placement, and exit criteria** systematically documented enable Language Proficiency Assessment Committees to execute their responsibilities conscientiously, consistently, and equitably.
- **Paper work** is reduced to a manageable level, utilizing the comprehensive ELAN Individual Profile Chart (see [Appendix M](#)) or the ELAN Campus Profile Chart (see [Appendix N](#)).

Future Directions

Four critical mega-steps, if you will, need to be accomplished in order to implement the use of an ELAN Profile Chart.

First, the criteria to be utilized must be determined, or developed as in the case of the observation instruments. **Second**, participants in the process will require training in the development and usage of the instruments. **Third**, the data collected annually should be evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively to assess any patterns and note any anomalies. **Fourth**, longitudinal data should be cross validated for accuracy so that adjustments in the Likert scales can be made accordingly.

Notes

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Appendices A-B
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Appendices C-L
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