# English Language Learners: The Impact of Language and Socio-Cultural Factors on Learning

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Our daily educational experiences can be enriched by learning in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms because we learn from others whose experiences and beliefs are different than ours. We learn to communicate effectively and respectfully with individuals of varied backgroundsand then may then think twice about stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors because we grow as individuals, as stewards of knowledge, and as change agents. We become good citizens in a pluralistic society.

Our fastest growing diverse population in PreK-12 are English language learners (ELLs) from diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. By 2030, English language learners (ELLs) will account for approximately 40% of the entire school-age population in the United States (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2013). ELL students are spread throughout the country with their proportion of the total public school enrollment varying greatly by state. In 2010, Nevada had the highest density of ELL enrollment at slightly over 31%, followed byCalifornia with 25%, New Mexico with 18.5%, and Arizona and Texas with about 15% each (Batalova & McHugh, 2010).

Educators across the country concede that too few adequate programs exist to address the needs of ELLs with disabilities (Utley, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011; Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, &Stephenson, 2003). This InfoSheet contains information drawn from federal regulations and other relevant sources for educators seeking to address the unique needs of ELLs with academic difficulties.

**Who are English Language Learners?**

Almost half of all culturally and linguistically diverse PreK-12 students have limited English language proficiency and are classified as English language learners, formerly known as limited English proficient (LEP) (Goldenberg, Reese, & Rezaei, 2011). An ELLis one who has to acquire a second or additional language and culture, a process that can be very challenging. The degree of challenge will depend on the personal, experiential, and contextual factors students bring to the process as well as how well they regulate the linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional tasks required in language and cultural acquisition (Chu, 2011; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2010; Marinova-Todd & Uchikoshi, 2011; Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011).

The ELL student population is not only culturally and linguistically diverse, but also socioeconomically diverse. Some students come from families with high levels of income and schooling, while others live in poverty or below poverty and have little formal schooling. This is important to know because family socioeconomic status and education level influence the academic achievement of

students (Goldenberg et al., 2011). Research indicates that low-income ELL students are usually behind their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in language and readiness skills and they need empirically validated and culturally responsive instruction (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

**What is Involved in Acquiring a Second Language?**

Acquiring a second language can be an arduous and slow process. Krashen and Terrell (1983) were the first to explore stages of second language acquisition and suggested there are five stages that an individual goes through in learning a second language: preproduction (0-6 months), early production (6 months-1 year), speech emergent (1-3 years), intermediate fluency (3-5 years), and advanced fluency (5-7 years). Many factors will influence the development of a second (or third) language such as age at arrival, first language proficiency, type of instruction including contextualized (i.e., supported by familiar situations and visual cues) and decontextualized instructional situations, and opportunities to use language (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Flynn & Hill, 2006).

Cummins (1984) differentiated between social and academic language acquisition and identified different timelines for each. Under ideal conditions, it takes the average ELL 2 years to acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). BICS involves the context–embedded, everyday language that occurs between conversational partners. On the other hand, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), or the context-reduced language of academics, takes 5 to 7 years under ideal conditions to develop to a level commensurate with that of native speakers. Often, many educators assume that because ELLs have achieved oral language proficiency in their second language they do not need support in school. However, research has consistently affirmed that it takes time for students to acquire a second language, at both the BICS and CALP levels, and to catch up with their monolingual peers (Marinova-Todd & Uchikoshi, 2011). Students must be exposed to rich learning environments with regular opportunities to practice language and literacy skills in the new language (Utley et al., 2011).

**What is the Difference Between Language Acquisition and a Language-based Learning Disability?**

Five percent of all school-age children in public schools have a learning disability. Over half of all students with a learning disability have a language-based learning disability, many with challenges in reading (Pierangelo& Giuliani, 2010). Oftentimes ELLs who are in the process of acquiring a second language will experience language and literacy development challenges similar to their peers with a language learning disability. See table below (Ortiz, 1992).

| Language Acquisition | Language Disorder |
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| *When children are learning English as a second language:* | *When children have a language impairment or disorder:* |
| • it is typical for their skills in English vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension to be less well-developedthan their peers who speakonly English. | • errors or limited skills in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension interfere with communication in their first language (L1), compared to peers from the samelanguage group. |
| • they will acquire English in a predictable developmental sequence, similar to younger children who are beginning to learn English. | • their English skills are delayed in comparison to peers from the same language group who have been learningEnglish for the same length of time. |
| • reduced opportunities to use their first language may result in loss of competence in L1 before becoming proficient in English. | • their communication is impaired in interactions with family members and others who speak the same language. |
| • they may switch back and forth between L1 and English, using their most sophisticated skills in both languages within single utterances. | • skills in their first language will be limited, inappropriate, or confused in content, form, or use. |
| • results from assessments conducted inEnglish are unlikely to reflect the child'strue skills and abilities in most domains. | • assessments conducted in English will be unable to discriminate between language acquisition and languagedisorder. |

On the other hand, it is critical that school personnel be able to predict when an ELL might also be experiencing a learning disability. If an ELL exhibits patterns of behavior similar to those listed below, then it may suggest a learning disability (Spear-Swerling, 2006).

- The child has a history of oral language delay or disability in the native language.
- The child has had difficulty developing literacy skills in the native language (assuming adequate instruction in the native language).
- There is a family history of reading difficulties in parents, siblings, or other close relatives (again, assuming adequate opportunity to learn to read).
- The child has specific language weaknesses, such as poor phonemic awareness, in the native language as

well as in English. (However, these difficulties may manifest somewhat differently in different languages, depending on the nature of the written language; for example, Spanish is a more transparent language than English, so children with phonological weaknesses may decode words more accurately in Spanish than in English.)

- The child has had research-based, high-quality reading intervention designed for English language learners, and still is not making adequate progress relative to other, similar English language learners

**Referral of an ELL for Special Education Assessment**

The increase in the number of ELLs in our nation's schools requires there to be a structure in place when referring, assessing, and identifying ELLs for special education services. Each school should have well developed referral guidelines and procedures as well as knowledgeable professionals who can examine academic and behavioral concerns from the context of language, culture, and disability. Many schools lack a comprehensive approach when assessing these students, and educators have difficulties sorting out the multiple overlapping characteristics of ELLs and students with learning disabilities (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Sanchez & Brisk, 2004).

It is important to remember that ELLs are entitled to the same services and interventions as their non-ELL peers. Response to Intervention (RTI), a critical component of the special education law, ensures equity and access to education for all students. RTI is a process that schools can use to help children who are struggling academically or behaviorally.One of its underlying premises is the possibility that a child's struggles may be due to inadequacies in instruction or in the curriculum either in use at the moment or in the child's past. Schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities (NICHCY, 2012).

The RTI instructional methods and interventions should be culturally sensitive and address the child's language needs. If after receiving high-quality instruction and intervention the ELL student does not demonstrate improvement, the student should be referred to a screening or intervention team to gather the following information:

- What is the student's level of English language proficiency? Low – Median – High
- What has been the student's rate of English acquisition?Low – Median – High
- Is the student struggling with cultural and affective issues? Low – Median – High
- Has the student received instruction that addresses his or her language and cultural needs? Low – Median – High
- What is the student's academic proficiency level compared to same-age peers?Low – Median – High
- Has the student received quality instruct-tion and intervention to meet her or his academic needs?Low – Median – High
- Is there objective evidence of failure to respond to intervention?
  Low – Median – High

If the intervention team determines the ELL's difficulties are not the result of language acquisition or acculturation issues, it would be appropriate to refer the student for further assessment in order to determine eligibility for special education services (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006).

Once the intervention team formally refers the student, a full psycho-educational

evaluation must be conducted. The following guidelines and requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-04), Part B,(U.S. Department of Education, 2006) must be met:

1. Parents should be notified of the proposed evaluation in their native language and they should be invited to be a part of the multidisciplinary team. The multidisciplinary team should, at minimum, include parents, general educators, special educators, and an ESL educator in order to assess whether the weaknesses evidenced by the student are attributable to inadequate instruction, limited English proficiency, or to a learning disability.

2. A variety of assessment tools and strategies should be employed when gathering relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the student. This includes information provided by the parent on how the child functions at home, developmental milestones, and physical and social behaviors compared to siblings and peers. It is important to find out from parents if their child had language delays in the native language. Careful attention should be given to cultural differences and prior schooling experience as well as to relevant family medical, immigration, and acculturation history.

3. No single measure or assessment can be used as the sole criterion to determine whether the child has a disability or for determining an appropriate educational program. Teams should gather multiple sources of information about the student because of the challenges associated with differentiating between language acquisition difficulty and disability-related characteristics when determining the cause for low achievement.

4. The instruments used in the assessment must be technically sound and help in determining how cognitive, behavioral, physical, or developmental factors contribute to the child's learning. This requires that the team members be knowledgeable about the instruments and their usefulness when assessing ELLs.

4. It is also the responsibility of team members to ensure that the assessments and other evaluation materials selected and administered are not racially or culturally biased. Team members should gather information from parents and others familiar with the student so they can better understand the family's racial and cultural background, and thus rule out assessments and materials that are inappropriate.

5. Assessment and other evaluation materials must be provided and administered in the child's native language and/or other mode of communication (e.g., sign language) and in the modality and language most likely to yield accurate information about the child's abilities. The majority of evaluation materials in the U.S. are available only in English; a few are available in Spanish. Translation of standardized- and norm-referenced tests is not considered best practice (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007) because translation affects a test's validity. In many instances, alternative assessment techniques such as structured observations, informal inventories, dynamic assessment, and diagnostic assessment should be incorporated into a comprehensive assessment.

6. Team members should ensure that the assessments and measures are used for the purposes for which they are designed and thus are reliable and valid. For example, a verbal intelligence measure administered in English should not be used to assess intelligence if the student has not yet developed adequate verbal skills in English.

7. The assessment and other evaluation materials must be administered by team members who have been trained and are knowledgeable of both the instruments and the nuances associated with assessing ELLs. Schools often lack school-based professional training in the assessment of ELLs. Consequently, team members with limited knowledge about the acquisition of a new language and a new culture often confuse differences with disabilities (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005). Therefore, it is important that educators be trained to recognize these differences and exercise caution when interpreting test results.

8. The student should be assessed in all areas of a suspected disability including health, vision, hearing, general intelligence, academic performance, communication skills, and/or motor abilities. The assessment is a collaboration amongst all team members, each contributing unique information about the student to help determine eligibility and an appropriate educational program.

**Determining Eligibility**

Once the assessment is complete, the team must determine if the ELL meets the criteria for special education services. These criteria include (a) having a disability, (b) experiencing adverse educational effects as a result of the disability, and (c) requiring specialized instruction that cannot be provided within a general education program. If the child is eligible for special education services, the team must begin to structure a program that meets the child's academic needs while still providing access to the general curriculum. This means the team will discuss the best instructional methods that will help the child to continue to develop English proficiency as well as improve academic skills that will ensure that the child meets the general education curriculum standards to the greatest degree possible. Once this information is determined, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be written.

**Developing an IEP**

If the student is found eligible for special education, the next step is to develop an IEP. Information that was gathered during the evaluation phase should be used to describe present levels of performance, areas of strengths and weaknesses, the nature of the disability, and its impact on the student's education. For ELLs, the assessments results should also provide educators with accurate diagnostic information about the degree to which the ELL's level of English proficiency and rate of acquisition can negatively impact performance in the general education classroom. Furthermore, it should provide information on the student's academic and ability levels in his or her primary language and how these compare to those in English. This should result in developing a program that will make use of the student's strengths in his or her native language and skills in order to facilitate the development of the second language. Each case of an ELL will be unique and the IEP will be individualized for assessment and instruction and will include clearly documented goals and objectives as well as the educators responsible for providing the services.

**Instructional Considerations**

English language learners with LD can benefit from interventions known to benefit their ELL peers without learning disabilities. These interventions include, but are not limited to, building background knowledge, explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, direct-instruction in vocabulary, context-embedded instruction, and peer-assisted learning. English language learners require additional sheltered instruction techniques such as graphic organizers, gestures, visual aids, and memory strategies to

facilitate English comprehension(Spear-Swerling, 2006).

**Resources for Teachers**

The following is a list of informal assessments for determining English language proficiency and acculturation status of ELLs. The assessment tools may be used by the intervention team when compiling information about an ELL who is being considered for a special education evaluation.

1. *Acculturation Quick Screen.* (2003). Published by CrossCultural Developmental Education Service, Ferndale, WA. Available at www.crosscultured.com

2. *Checklistof Language Skills for Use with Limited English Proficient Students.* http://www.k12.wa.us/SPECIALED/pubdocs/culturally_linguistically_diverse/limited_english_proficient_checklist.pdf

3. *Classroom Language Interaction Checklist.* (2002). Published by CrossCultural Developmental Education Service, Ferndale, WA. Available at www.crosscultured.com

4. *Resiliency Checklist.* (2002). Published by CrossCultural Developmental Education Service, Ferndale, WA. Available at www.crosscultured.com

5. *Sociocultural Checklist*. (2002). Published by CrossCultural Developmental Education Service, Ferndale, WA. Available at www.crosscultured.com

6. *Student Oral Language Observation Matrix* (SOLOM) (1985). Developed by San Jose U.S.D., San Jose, CA. Available at http://coe.sdsu.edu/people/jmora/LangAssessmtMMdl

7. *ELL Starter Kit for Educators: Tools for Monitoring Language Skills*. Available at http://www.colorincolorado.org/pdfs/guides/ellstarterkit.pdf

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