English Language Learners: Differentiating Language Learning versus Language Based Learning Disability

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 backgrounds and 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 is English learners (ELs) from diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. The number of ELs that enrolled in public schools in the 2012-13 school year was 9.2 percent, which has increased compared to 2002-03 (8.7%). ELs are spread throughout the country with their proportion of the total public school enrollment varying greatly by state. In 2013, of the six states with the highest density of ELs enrollment, California had 22.8% EL enrollment, followed by New Mexico (15.8), Nevada (15.7%), Texas (15.1%), Colorado (12%), and Alaska (11.3%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). To help ensure ELs attain English proficiency and high levels of academic achievement, school districts with an enrollment of twenty or more ELs in the same grade level are required to provide appropriate language assistance programs. For example, in Texas, of the 739,639 ELs, 17% are enrolled in Bilingual/ ESL programs, 18% are enrolled in ELL programs, 1.4% are enrolled in immigrant programs, and 0.6% are enrolled in migrant programs. Furthermore, according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA; 2015), there are 70,510 special education ELs in Texas, highlighting the ongoing debate on the correct identification of learning disabilities among ELs and the need for adequate programs to address the needs of ELs with disabilities.

Who are English learners?

Almost half of all culturally and linguistically diverse

PreK-12 students have limited English language proficiency and are classified as English learners, formerly known as limited English proficient (LEP)(Goldenberg, Reese, & Rezaei, 2011). An EL is one who has to acquire English as 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.

The EL 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 because family socioeconomic status and education level influence the academic achievement of students. Research indicates that low-income ELs are usually behind their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in language and readiness skills; therefore, they need empirically validated and culturally responsive instruction.

The Difference between First and Second Language Acquisition

Our understanding of the nature of the first and second language, how they develop and how they are used by different individuals at different times and in different settings, continues to evolve. Cummins (1984) stated that compared to the first language, learning a second language can be an arduous and slow process. He differentiated between social and academic language acquisition and identified different timelines for each. Under ideal conditions, it takes the average EL 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 ELs 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 catch up with their monolingual peers. Students must be exposed to rich learning environments with regular opportunities to practice language and literacy skills in the new language.

Collier (2007) developed The Prism Model that explains the complex interacting factors that ELs experience in the process of acquiring a second language within the school context. This conceptual model has the following four interdependent and complex components:

- **Sociocultural Processes.** The social and cultural surrounding of ELs is at the heart of the process of acquiring a second language. For ELs the social and cultural processes occur through everyday life within the home, school, and community context. These processes may have a positive effect (i.e., by providing a sociocultural supportive environment) or negative effect (i.e., by creating social and psychological distance between the ELs and non-ELs) on the ELs.

- **Language Development.** In addition to the metalinguistic and formal language instruction, this component consists of the subconscious aspects of language development (the innate ability that all humans possess for acquiring oral language). Linguistic development includes the acquisition of the oral and written systems of the student's first and second languages such as phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax, semantics, pragmatics, paralinguistic and discourse.

- **Academic Development.** Academic development includes different subject matters taught in school such as language arts, mathematics, the sciences, and social studies for each grade level. This knowledge transfers from the first language to the second language, making it more efficient to develop academic work through ELs' first language, while teaching the second language through meaningful academic content instruction.

- **Cognitive development.** This dimension is a natural subconscious process that occurs developmentally from birth to the end of schooling and beyond, and

plays a critical role both in the first and second language development. In general, students bring 5-6 years of cognitive development in their first language to the second language educational setting. This knowledge base is an important stepping stone to build on as ELs cognitive development continues. When ELs use the second language at school, they function at a level cognitively far below their age. Thus, an ELs cognitive development should continue through his/her first language at least through the elementary school years.

Language Acquisition versus Language-Based Learning Disability

ELs enter school needing to learn oral language and literacy in English in an efficient manner to be able to catch up with their monolingual English-speaking classmates. Unfortunately, due to lack of appropriate assessment tools for distinguishing between EL's difficulty to acquire a second language or a language-based learning disability, and lack of professional personnel that are aware of the unique needs of ELs many ELs are inappropriately over identified as having learning disabilities and placed in special education programs. Specifically, 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 ELs 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. Therefore, it is critical that school personnel are able to predict when an EL might be experiencing a learning disability.

Although, there is no single effective method for identifying ELs who have difficulty acquiring language skills and those who have learning disabilities, the following questions may help determine the source of ELs difficulty (Burr, Haas, & Ferriere, 2015):

1. Is the EL receiving instruction of sufficient quality to enable him/her to make the accepted levels of academic progress?

2. How does the EL's progress in hearing, speaking, reading, and writing English as a second language compare with the expected rate of progress for his/her age and initial level of English proficiency?

3. To what extent are behaviors that might indicate a learning disability considered to be normal for the child's cultural background or to be part of the process of U.S. acculturation?

4. How might additional factors, such as socioeconomic status, previous education experience, fluency in his/her first language, attitude toward school, attitude toward learning English, and personality attributes, impact the student's academic progress?

Furthermore, within the school context, information about the normal developmental trajectories of ELs' literacy development (i.e., their reading and writing skills) may also help differentiate language acquisition versus language-based learning disability, such as:

- **Opportunity to Learn.** Based on federal and state laws before identifying an EL as learning disabled, instructors must rule out a lack of adequate opportunity to learn. Therefore, the first step in identifying ELs with learning disabilities is to evaluate the quality of instruction that the child has received. Specifically, what is the EL's level of language proficiency? Is the classroom instruction based on the EL's background knowledge?

- **Oral language proficiency.** Oral language proficiency includes receptive skills, expressive skills, and the ability to use specific aspects of the oral language, such as phonology, vocabulary, morphology, grammar, discourse, and pragmatic skills. For example, ELs that have communication difficulties in both English and their first language maybe experiencing a language based learning disability and need to be further screened.

- **Phonological processing.** Phonological processing is the ability to use the sounds of the language to process oral and written language. Phonological processing includes phonological awareness (the ability to consciously attend to the sounds of a language as distinct from its meaning), phonological recoding (the ability to convert nonphonological stimulus, such as a picture or a written word, to phonological output), and phonological memory (the ability to temporary store phonologically coded information in the short-term memory).

- **Working memory.** Working memory actively manipulates the presented information while simultaneously holding the information in the memory. Working memory is vital for reading comprehension as readers need to simultaneously decode words, actively process and remember what has been read.

- **Word-level skills.** Word-level skills include a combination of the knowledge of letter-sound relationships to decode print (phonological skills), and knowledge of sight vocabulary of words that are frequently encountered in text (visual skills). Decoding skills enable students to read complex and unfamiliar words while visual skills contributes to students' reading fluency and reading comprehension.

- **Text-level skills.** Reading comprehension and writing are integrated text-level processes. Reading comprehension involves a combination of lexical knowledge, semantic knowledge, syntactic knowledge and background and textual knowledge. Writing involves word-level skills, cognitive abilities (such as working memory, linguistic awareness, and attention), and metacognitive skills (such as planning, strategy use, and self-regulation).

Educators need to use various strategies and assessment tools, such as the response to intervention approach, to identify ELs source of difficulty (for more information please refer to Lesaux et al., 2008).

Referral of an EL for Special Education Assessment

The increase in the number of ELs in our nation's schools requires there to be a structure in place when referring, assessing, and identifying ELs 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 ELs and students with learning disabilities.

It is important to remember that ELs are entitled to the same services and interventions as their non-EL 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 (CPRI, 2013).

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 EL does not demonstrate improvement, the student should be referred to a screening or intervention team to gather the following information:

- The student's level of English language proficiency.

- The student's rate of English acquisition.

- The extent that the student is struggling with cultural and affective issues.

- The amount of instruction that addresses the student's language and cultural needs.

- The student's academic proficiency level compared to same-age peers.

- The amount of instruction and intervention to meet the student's academic needs.

- Objective evidence of student's failure to respond to intervention.

If the intervention team determines the EL'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.

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. A multidisciplinary team that includes parents, general educators, special educators, and an ESL educator should assess whether the student's weaknesses 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.

3. No single measure or assessment can be u s e d 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
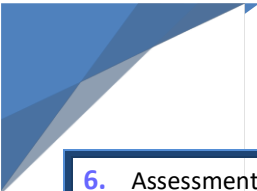
Resources for Teachers

The following is a list of informal assessments for determining English language proficiency and acculturation status of ELs.

- **WIDA Screener (2014)**. Developed by The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

- **Acculturation Quick Screen (2003)**. Developed by Dr. Catherine Collier.

- **Checklist of Language Skills for Use with Limited English Proficient Students**.

- **Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM; 1985)**. Developed by San Jose U.S.D., San Jose, CA.

- **Language Development for English Language Learners Professional Development Module (2009)**. Developed by Centers on Instruction.

- **The English Language Learner Knowledge Base (2011)**. Published by Centers on Instruction.

  Accommodations for English Language Learner Students: The Effect of Linguistic Modification of Math Test Item Sets (2010). Published by Centers on Instruction.

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 ELs.

5. Team members also 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.

6. Assessment and other evaluation materials must be provided and administered in the child's first 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.

7. 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.

8. Team members who have been trained and are knowledgeable of both the instruments and the nuances associated with assessing ELs, must administer all assessments and evaluation materials.

9. 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 EL meets the criteria for special education services. These criteria include:

- Having a disability,

- Experiencing adverse educational effects as a result of the disability, and

- 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

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 ELs, the assessments results should also provide educators with accurate diagnostic information about the degree to which the EL'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 EL 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 learners with LD can benefit from interventions known to benefit their EL 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 learners require additional sheltered instruction techniques such as graphic organizers, gestures, visual aids, and memory strategies to facilitate English comprehension (Spear-Swerling, 2006).

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Recommended citation:
Khalaf, S. & Santi, K.L. (2016) *English Language Learners: The Impact of Language and Socio-Cultural Factors on Learning*. CLD Information Sheet. Retrieved from: http://www.council-for-learning-disabilities.org/infosheets-supporting-translation-of-research-to-practice.