

DISTINGUISHING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FROM LEARNING DISABILITIES

The single biggest error made in placing English language learners (ELLs) into special education is misinterpreting language acquisition as a learning or language disability. In this guide, several questions are raised about how to distinguish language acquisition from learning disabilities (LD) and offer answers for each.

HOW CAN TEACHERS DETERMINE IF AN ELL'S STRUGGLES WITH READING IN ENGLISH ARE DUE TO LD OR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

When distinguishing language acquisition from LD, many factors must be considered. It is important for teachers to understand the second language acquisition process, to recognize possible characteristics associated with LD, and to look at the quality of instruction to determine whether students truly have received an adequate opportunity to learn.

Teachers should use a hypothesis-driven approach when determining whether an ELL has LD. Begin the referral and evaluation process by exploring the hypothesis that the causes of the student's learning difficulties are primarily external factors. When conducting the assessment, do so with the notion that there is nothing wrong with the individual and that systemic, ecological, or environmental factors are the primary reason for learning problems. Maintain this hypothesis until data suggest otherwise and all plausible external factors have been ruled out. The point is not to look for whom or what to *blame* for a child's struggles, but rather to understand the multiple complex factors that are affecting the child's learning and performance.

IS THERE A TEST TEACHERS CAN GIVE THAT WILL INDICATE WHETHER AN ELL HAS LD?

There are no tests that can definitively reveal whether a student has LD. Therefore, it is essential to consider a variety of factors. To a large extent, determining whether an English language learner has a learning disability is a process of elimination; many intrinsic and extrinsic factors must be considered and ruled out as possible reasons for a child's struggles. This can be an extensive process, as there are multiple possible explanations for every behavior.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CONSIDER A STUDENT'S "OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN" WHEN DETERMINING WHETHER HE OR SHE MAY HAVE LD?

Some ELLs are identified as having LD not because they have disabilities, but rather because they have not received an adequate opportunity to learn. Federal and state special education laws specify that a lack of opportunity to learn must be ruled out before a disability determination can be made. Therefore, looking at the quality of instruction ELLs receive is our necessary first step when deciding whether to pursue an evaluation for possible special education placement.

To determine whether instruction is appropriate, teachers must look into classrooms while also examining classroom progress by monitoring data sets to look for patterns in student performance. If most ELLs or similar peers are thriving, then it is likely that instruction is appropriate. If most ELLs are showing little progress, then instruction needs to be changed to better meet their language and learning needs.

Some ELLs are taught in "disabling contexts," with too few opportunities to receive appropriate instruction matched to their needs and too few opportunities to develop their oral language and literacy skills. For example, in a recent study of a diverse school implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) for the first time, Orosco and Klingner (2010) observed many teachers providing inadequate instruction to ELLs. Specifically, these teachers did not consider their students' language proficiency, they did not build on their background knowledge or connect instruction to their home lives, and much of the instruction was out of context and inaccessible for students.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THAT CAN MIRROR LD?

It is important for us to know possible characteristics associated with LD and how these might manifest in students acquiring English as a second or additional language. There are multiple possible reasons for students to display each of these behaviors. Thus, when teachers notice any of their ELLs exhibiting one of the behaviors, their first thought should be to wonder if the underlying reason for the behavior might be second language acquisition. The following list is not exhaustive, but rather represents a sampling of characteristics focused on oral language and literacy:

Some Similarities Between LD and Language Acquisition	
<i>Behaviors Associated w/ LD</i>	<i>Behaviors when Acquiring an L2</i>
Difficulty following directions	Difficulty following directions because the directions were not well understood; it can be harder to remember directions in a second language.
Difficulty with phonological awareness	Difficulty auditorily distinguishing between sounds not in one's first language, or sounds that are presented in a different order.
Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence	Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when it is different than in one's first language. Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in the first language.
Difficulty remembering sight words	Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings are not understood.
Difficulty retelling a story in sequence	Difficulty retelling a story in English without the expressive skills to do so; yet the student might understand more than s/he can convey (i.e., receptive skills in English might be stronger than expressive skills).
Confusion with figurative language	Confusion with figurative language, idioms, pronouns, conjunctions, and words with multiple meanings.
Slow to process challenging language	Slow to process challenging language because it is not well understood.
May have poor auditory memory	May seem to have poor auditory memory if sounds or words are unfamiliar or not well understood.
May have difficulty concentrating	Learning in a second language is mentally exhausting; therefore, ELLs may seem to have difficulty concentrating at times.
May seem easily frustrated	Learning in a second language can be frustrating.

IN WHAT WAYS IS LEARNING TO READ IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND OR ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE DIFFERENT THAN LEARNING TO READ IN ENGLISH AS A FIRST LANGUAGE THAT CAN BE CONFUSING FOR ELLS?

Although there are many similarities between learning to read in English as one's first language and learning English as a second language, there also are key differences (August & Shanahan, 2006). When the differences are downplayed, teachers and others might misunderstand why, when taught with the same methods, ELLs are not progressing as rapidly as their English-speaking peers.

ELLs share common challenges when learning to read English as a second or additional language that can mirror the characteristics of LD. As noted on the previous page, phonological awareness tasks become much more challenging when a student's first language does not include the English phonemes addressed in the task. It is very difficult to distinguish auditorily between sounds not in one's first language, and to pronounce them. Teachers, speech and language pathologists, and psychologists who misinterpret why an ELL cannot hear the differences between sounds may erroneously conclude that the student has deficits in auditory discrimination or phonological awareness. Having an understanding of which English phonemes do not exist in the student's native language can diminish the chances of making this error. To more accurately assess the student's phonological awareness, use phonemes the student knows and, when using unfamiliar English phonemes, make an effort to provide the student with instruction that is explicit. Additionally, teachers should keep in mind that the order of phonemes in a word matters; it is more difficult to distinguish and manipulate phonemes presented in an unfamiliar order.

ELLs may also struggle with decoding, especially if their native language orthography is quite dissimilar from English orthography. Letters can look the same across languages but have very different sounds. For example, although most consonants in English and Spanish have similar sounds, vowel sounds differ. The process of learning sound-symbol correspondence can seem abstract and confusing. ELLs may also be at a disadvantage when trying to figure out how to decode new words using context clues if the meaning of these words is not understood. Teachers should look for ways to make instruction meaningful rather than abstract, and to help students make connections between new learning and prior knowledge.

Vocabulary can present special challenges for ELLs. ELLs are more likely to be confused by figurative language, common words such as pronouns and conjunctions, words with multiple meanings, and false cognates. ELLs may be good word callers without understanding the meaning of what they are reading. It is important for teachers to differentiate between those words that students understand in their native language for which they simply need English labels, and words whose underlying concepts are not understood. Explicit instruction with multiple opportunities for practice in meaningful contexts can help.

Reading comprehension for ELLs is affected by many factors, including their oral language proficiency, ability to use comprehension strategies, knowledge of different text structures, background knowledge about a topic, cultural differences, and general level of interest. Providing explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and text structures, building background knowledge, and helping ELLs connect with their prior knowledge all can help with comprehension. ELLs often understand more of what they read in English than they are able to convey. Thus, providing them with alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding can help. Consider using diagrams (e.g., labeling the parts of a plant) or matching activities rather than administering solely essay exams. Also, teachers should encourage students to respond in a combination of English and other languages, enabling them to draw from their full linguistic repertoire.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIMULTANEOUS AND SEQUENTIAL BILINGUALS, AND WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Sequential bilinguals acquire one language in the home and then another language after they start school or even later. Simultaneous bilinguals, on the other hand, acquire two or more languages at about the same time, from birth or during early childhood (experts differ on the cut-off age for “simultaneous” acquisition of a second language). Immigrant students are more likely to be sequential bilinguals, whereas second and third generation ELLs are more likely to be simultaneous bilinguals. The majority of ELLs in the United States are actually simultaneous bilinguals rather than sequential bilinguals.

It seems common to think of simultaneous bilingual students as two monolinguals in one and to compare them with monolingual English speakers and monolingual speakers of another language when assessing their language proficiency. Doing so does not adequately account for the process of acquiring two languages at once and sets up a deficit perspective. Often bilingual students are described as “limited in both languages” or as “not having a strong first language.” Yet this depiction fails to take into account their full linguistic repertoire. Consider this example: a five-year-old simultaneous bilingual student is administered a Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in English and scores at a lower level than a typical monolingual English speaking five-year-old. That same five-year-old then takes a Spanish version of the test and scores at a lower level than a fluent Spanish speaking five-year-old. He’s lower than average in Spanish as well as English—so “limited-limited.” But what would happen if the total number of words that the five-year-old knows in English *and* Spanish were added together? The combination could very well be *greater* than the total number of words known by fluent English-only or Spanish-only speakers. From this perspective, the five-year-old is not limited at all. In fact, he has a head start towards becoming fully bilingual if his acquisition of both languages was appropriately nurtured. This example underscores that many teachers need a new way to think about the process of simultaneous bilingual language acquisition (Escamilla, 2000).

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ELLS AND THE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROCESS? WHAT ARE THE REALITIES?

There are several common misconceptions about the second language acquisition process that affect both the instruction ELLs receive and the academic decisions made about them. Teachers should have a basic understanding of the theories of language acquisition and how the intersections of language and learning influence the learning trajectories of the ELLs they teach. Misconceptions about language and literacy development can perpetuate a deficit view of ELLs' ability to learn. This results in ELLs' language being seen as a problem to be fixed rather than an asset to build on. The following table highlights some common misconceptions and realities and presents implications for each:

Misconceptions and Realities about the Language Acquisition Process

Misconception	Reality	Implications
<i>Bilingualism means equal proficiency in both languages.</i>	Bilingualism rarely means equal proficiency in both languages.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ELLs are students with a wide range of proficiencies in their home language and English, with varying levels of bilingualism. 2. Bilingual students may be stronger in some areas in their home language and stronger in other areas in English.
<i>"Semilingualism" is a valid concept and non-non classifications indicating children are limited in their home language and English (based on test results) are useful categories.</i>	Semilingualism and non-non categories are the results of tests that do not measure the full range and depth of language proficiencies among ELLs acquiring two languages simultaneously.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The vast majority of children begin school having acquired the syntactic and morphological rules of the language of their community. 2. Current language assessment measures rarely capture the full range of skills that bilingual children bring to the classroom. 3. Classifying students as "limited-limited" or "non-non" is not useful because it does not guide teachers as to what students know or need to learn; instead, it promotes low expectations. 4. Other forms of authentic assessment should be used to determine language proficiency levels of ELLs, including natural language samples.
<i>The more time students spend receiving English literacy instruction (being immersed in it), the faster</i>	Students who receive some home language literacy instruction achieve at higher levels in English	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instruction in English and interactions with English speakers are important, but not enough to provide the optimal support for ELLs to be able to fully participate in

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<p><i>they will learn to read in English.</i></p>	<p>reading than students who do not receive it.</p>	<p>classroom learning and achieve to their potential. 2. Skills developed in students’ native language transfer to English, particularly when teachers help students make connections across languages. 3. Students acquire English when they receive input that is understandable (i.e. by using language in context, providing background knowledge, using visual and context cues, clarifying vocabulary).</p>
<p><i>Errors are problematic and should be avoided.</i></p>	<p>“Errors” are a positive sign that the student is making progress and are a necessary aspect of second language acquisition.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overgeneralizing grammatical rules from one language to another is a natural, normal aspect of second language acquisition-this is referred to as interlanguage. 2. Errors such as confusion with verb tenses, plurals, possessives, word order, subject/verb agreement, and the use of articles are common among ELLs and should not be interpreted as signifying that a student has a disability. 3. Code-switching is common among bilingual individuals around the world and should not be considered a sign of confusion.
<p><i>ELLs are not ready to engage in higher level thinking until they learn basic skills.</i></p>	<p>ELLs are equally capable of engaging in higher level thinking as their fully proficient peers.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instruction and practice at every grade level must provide frequent opportunities for ELLs to engage in higher level thinking. 2. Instruction should ensure that ELLs of all proficiency levels have multiple entry points to access content.
<p><i>All ELLs learn English in the same way at about the same rate; a slow rate of acquisition indicates a possible disability.</i></p>	<p>The length of time it takes students to acquire academic language in English varies a great deal, from four to seven years or more.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Many different variables affect the language acquisition process. 2. Even when ELLs appear to be quite proficient in English, they may not yet have acquired full academic proficiency. 3. The reasons for an ELL’s struggles when learning to read are more likely to relate to the language acquisition process than to a disability.

Note: Adapted from Klingner, Almanza de Schonewise, de Onis, Méndez Barletta, & Hoover (2008).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO USE AN ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK TO DETERMINE WHETHER AN ELL HAS LD?

Using an ecological framework considers both contextual and intrinsic factors that can affect a student's performance. An ecological framework for evaluating ELLs should have four elements:

- a systematic process for examining the specific background variables or ecologies of ELLs (e.g., first and second language proficiency, educational history, socioeconomic status, cultural variables);
- information gathered through a variety of informal and formal assessments;
- examination of the appropriateness of classroom instruction and the classroom context based on knowledge of individual student factors; and
- nondiscriminatory interpretation of all assessment data.

It is important to consider the unique characteristics ELLs bring to the learning environment and to think about how factors including their familiarity with and exposure to English, socioeconomic status, prior schooling experiences, and life experiences, interact with and influence their learning. Authentic assessments should be used in addition to progress monitoring to determine what students know and can do, as well as what they need to learn. As part of this process, English language acquisition specialists should assess ELLs' language proficiency and academic skills in English and their first language. Special education teachers, psychologists, and/or speech language therapists may conduct additional formal and informal assessments. Team members should observe the child in different contexts to better understand the instructional environment and the conditions the student seems to both thrive and struggle. When administering an assessment as part of a comprehension evaluation, a few questions can help guide the process:

- What do I want to find out?
- What can I learn from this assessment (i.e., what is its purpose)?
- What will I do with the information?
- What OTHER explanations might help explain a student's performance?

CASE EXAMPLES

Below are two real-life examples that help to illustrate some of the principles described above. When considering both of these cases, can we rule out language acquisition as a factor in explaining why these students struggled? What about the role of instruction?

The first example is of a child study team meeting held to discuss James, a first-grade ELL who speaks Haitian Creole and who, at the time of the meeting, was at a beginning level of English proficiency (from Harry & Klingner, 2006):

- Teacher: “My real concern is that when I give a direction (in English) he gives me a blank look, like he doesn’t understand. He’s lost.” She also noted that he had difficulty paying attention.
- Assistant principal: “A lot of children in ESOL have these difficulties.”
- Teacher: “But I think it’s more than that. It’s more a matter of higher level thinking.”

The teacher’s rationale was accepted by the team, who then proceeded to refer the student for an evaluation. They did not discuss his native language skills or whether he exhibited these same problems in Haitian Creole.

James’ teacher referred several of his classmates to the child study team, yet no one from the school observed the instruction given in James’ class to determine if he and his classmates were receiving an adequate opportunity to learn. Almost all of the students were ELLs at beginning levels of English language proficiency. The following excerpt was typical of the several observations outside researchers conducted in James’s class; the excerpt illustrates a lack of appropriate instruction.

- Teacher: “The last sense is the sense of touch. That means you feel. Feel the floor with your elbows. Can you feel it?” [OC: The students don’t understand what to do. There are no visual cues.]
- Teacher (yelling), “Some of you are being extremely rude.” Then she asks more calmly, “So did you feel the floor with your elbows, but do you normally feel with your elbow?” A few students respond, “No.” Teacher yells again, “You just finished telling me you were listening, Ezekiel. Were you lying to me? I’m only going to call on the people who are listening.” ...
- Teacher: “If I wanted to eat cake, what sense would I use?” ... “My point is that you use your sense of taste to decide if you like it.”
- Teacher (yelling): “Pay attention to me, not his shoes! His shoes aren’t going to give you a grade. I will.” “If one more person touches shoes, I’m going to throw it in the garbage. It’s important to make sure your shoes are tied, but not while I’m teaching.”

The second real-life example is about Marta. After being tested and identified as having LD, before the beginning of 3rd grade Marta was placed in a LD class. Her 2nd grade teacher had referred her for a special education evaluation citing her lack of academic progress. Based on the results of their battery of tests, the IEP team considered Marta to be low in both her home language (Spanish) and in English. They believed that she had auditory processing deficits and showed a significant discrepancy between IQ and achievement.

In kindergarten, Marta had been in a bilingual program and received instruction in Spanish, but then her family moved to a school without a bilingual program. As a result, she received English-only instruction during both 1st and 2nd grades. Marta's parents described her as intelligent and very helpful at home with her younger siblings. They were concerned that Marta was not doing better in school, and trusted the school's judgment that Marta needed special education.

In September of her 3rd grade year, Marta was assessed on a variety of tasks in both Spanish and English, and the decision was made (in collaboration with her family and others) to provide her with Spanish literacy instruction as well as intensive oral English language development. A method used was Language Experience Approach—she dictated stories to the teacher in Spanish that she then learned to read for herself. She “took off,” so to speak, and gained two grade levels in Spanish reading in just a few months. She also expressed a strong interest in reading in English, and so in February she began English literacy instruction. By June she was on grade level in English and above grade level in Spanish. Her eligibility for special education was reassessed and she was found ineligible; she was then exited from the program.