

# **English Language Learners: Differentiating Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities**

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# Introduction

Whether you are a special education teacher, a general education teacher, a psychologist, a social worker, a parent, an administrator, or someone else in a support role, these are exciting times to be working with English language learners (ELLs)<sup>1</sup>. In a recent article in the *The New York Times*, Bhattacharjee (2012) pointed out the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, noting that being bilingual can “make you smarter,” and that bilingualism can have a “profound effect on your brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language and even shielding against dementia in old age” (p. SR12). Bhattacharjee explained that, until recently, many experts believed that the challenges faced by bilinguals when figuring out which of their languages to use caused interference or confusion. However, as Martin-Rhee and Bialystok (2008) research showed, whenever bilingual individuals speak, both (or all) of their languages are active. Rather than causing interference, the challenge of figuring out how best to communicate provides a “cognitive workout” that can actually strengthen the brain. Bilinguals are generally believed to be more flexible thinkers and better than monolinguals at solving certain kinds of mental puzzles. They may be able to out-perform their monolingual peers because of enhanced executive functioning (i.e., the brain’s ability to plan, monitor understanding, apply strategies, ignore distractions, and solve problems).

Why is this important? It is significant for bilingual individuals as well as for everyone else. In its *Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), the Obama Administration stated that an important goal for the United States as a nation is to produce high school graduates who are fully bilingual and multicultural and ready to compete in the global economy. If that is the case, then we should regard students who begin school already knowing another language besides English as having a head start over their peers. If we nurture their bilingualism and capitalize on their linguistic, cultural, and experiential strengths—helping them to feel “smart” rather than “at risk” —then we will enrich their school experiences as well as our own (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, in press). We can do this by making sure ELLs have every opportunity to interact with peers and use academic language, engage in higher level thinking, and contribute in their classrooms and schools in meaningful ways. As delineated by the CEC position statement on instruction for ELLs with learning disabilities (LD; see box, Essential Components), everyone who works with ELLs should learn how best to support their language acquisition as well as their academic and social development.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms *English language learner* and *emerging bilingual student* to refer to those students in the process of acquiring English who are not yet fully proficient.

# CHAPTER 1

## *Who Are ELLs? How Can We Determine if an ELL's Struggles With Reading in English Are Due to LD or Language Acquisition?*

This chapter addresses:

- Demographics of ELLs
- Prevalence of ELLs with learning disabilities
- Challenges of identifying ELLs with learning disabilities
- Distinguishing language acquisition and learning disabilities

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. Perhaps you now have ELLs in your class or classes but in previous years you did not. It used to be that ELLs concentrated in certain states and pockets in the United States—but now they can be anywhere. ELLs are the fastest growing section of the student population. Recently, over a 10-year period, the increase in ELLs nationwide was about 51%, whereas the total preK–12 student population only increased by about 7.22% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). The vast majority of ELLs speak Spanish as their first language, although many other first languages are also represented (Aud et al., 2011). Latinos/Hispanics totaled about 16.5% of the U.S. population in 2009 and included about 50 million people (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Across the United States, in 2011, about 25% of the public elementary school population and about 21% of the high school population was Hispanic (Fry & Lopez, 2012). In addition, states such as California (Kane, 2010) and Texas (Smith, 2012) have a majority of Hispanic students in their public schools.

ELLs tend to underachieve in comparison with fluent English-speaking classmates on tests of English literacy (e.g., Abedi, 2002). Data from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show a 25-point gap between Whites and Hispanics in fourth-grade reading achievement and a 24-point discrepancy at eighth grade (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Other issues correlate with these scores, such as whether or not the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. In any case, it is clear that we must help improve ELLs' reading comprehension.

# CHAPTER 2

## *What Are Some of the Characteristics of Language Acquisition That Can Mirror LD?*

This chapter addresses:

- Characteristics of LD that can mirror language acquisition
- Characteristics of language acquisition that can mirror LD
- How these characteristics are manifested when reading

For educators to be able to distinguish between characteristics associated with LD and characteristics of students struggling to acquire English as a second or additional language, they must be aware of the finer points of each of these challenges. As discussed in Chapter 1, instruction that “works” for their mainstream peers might not be as effective for ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008). This does not mean, however, that the student has a learning disability.

### **Learning Disabilities**

#### ***Definition***

The federal government has defined a *specific learning disability* as

a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disabilities, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (20 U.S.C. §1401 [30][A]–[C])

# CHAPTER 3

## ***What Are Some of the Different Types of ELLs and Why Are These Distinctions Important?***

This chapter addresses:

- Definition of types of ELLs
- Why these distinctions are important
- What educators can do to understand and support the needs of diverse ELLs

Although ELLs have the shared experience of learning an additional language and culture, we need to be cognizant of the diversity of our students and be careful not to group them only by language proficiency or ethnic background. They bring so many diverse educational and lived experiences to our classrooms.

### **Types of ELLs**

#### ***Sequential Versus Simultaneous Bilinguals***

*Sequential bilinguals* first acquire one language in the home (L1) and then another language after they start school, or later (L2). On the other hand, *simultaneous bilinguals* acquire two or more languages at about the same time, from birth or early childhood (Baker, 2001). Experts differ on when the cut-off is for acquisition of the second language to begin and still be considered “simultaneous.” The majority of ELLs in the United States are actually simultaneous bilinguals rather than sequential bilinguals. Immigrant students are more likely to be sequential bilinguals, whereas second and third generation ELLs are more likely to be simultaneous bilinguals. Although the majority of emerging bilinguals are considered simultaneous bilinguals, this is a concept we are still learning about, which, therefore, leaves room for misinterpretation of how and why ELLs progress as they do in school (Petrovic, 2010).

# CHAPTER 4

## *What Does It Mean to Consider “Opportunity to Learn” When Determining Whether Students May Have LD?*

This chapter addresses:

- Implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive instruction in all tiers of instruction
- High-quality core instruction for ELLs that involves research-based promising practices
- High-quality Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction with tier alignment
- Process for ensuring opportunity to learn

Some ELLs are inappropriately 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 (IDEA, 2006). Therefore, looking at the quality of instruction ELLs receive is a necessary first step when deciding whether to pursue an evaluation for possible special education placement. To determine whether instruction is appropriate, we must look into classrooms and ensure they are culturally and linguistically responsive and foster promising practices for ELLs. High-quality instruction for ELLs ensures access to the curriculum, is interactive and meaningful, and develops both content knowledge and language skills.

Many schools are moving toward using a multitiered instructional and assessment model such as response to intervention (RTI) in their programming to implement instruction, monitor progress, and refer students for potential LD identification and special education placement. The key components of the RTI model include high-quality instruction matched to the needs of students, evidence-based interventions of increasing intensity, ongoing progress monitoring, and data-driven decision making (Hoover, 2008; Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008). The RTI model is both a prevention and an intervention model of instruction. All students are screened and identified as at risk for learning difficulties in reading. Those students who are struggling in the classroom are provided interventions

# CHAPTER 5

## *What Are Some Common Misconceptions About ELLs and the Second Language Acquisition Process? What Are the Realities?*

This chapter addresses:

- What it means to be bilingual
- Assessing ELLs' full linguistic repertoire
- Providing instruction that enables ELLs to draw on all of their linguistic knowledge

Several misconceptions about the second language acquisition process affect the instruction ELLs receive and the decisions made about them. McLaughlin (1992) referred to these as “what every teacher needs to unlearn”. Educators should have at least a basic understanding of the theories of language acquisition and how the intersections of language and learning influence the learning trajectories of ELLs. Misconceptions about language and literacy development can perpetuate a deficit view of ELLs' ability to learn. When this happens, ELLs' language proficiencies in other languages become seen as a problem to be fixed rather than an asset to build on.

We know a lot about bilingualism and the second language acquisition process (e.g., Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Bialystok, 2001; Collier, 2005; Cummins, 1986, 1989; Grabe, 2009; Grosjean & Li, 2013; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). This chapter draws upon the vast research literature to offer positive and constructive solutions to the challenges teachers and others face in their schools and classrooms with emerging bilingual students. Table 5.1 highlights some common misconceptions and realities and presents implications for each.

### **Misconception: Bilingualism Means Equal Proficiency in Both Languages**

Bilingualism and what it means to be bilingual continue to be misunderstood by the education community at large. In the U.S. public school system, ELLs are a diverse group and include children who were born in countries around the world, as well as those born in the United States. English language learners' linguistic proficiencies in their multiple



# CHAPTER 6

## *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?*

This chapter addresses:

- Similarities and differences in learning to read in a first language and second or additional language
- Multiple explanations for why students might lack phonological awareness
- How you can support your ELLs' vocabulary development

Have you ever been told that learning to read in English as a second or additional language is just like learning to read in one's first language? Perhaps you were even told that you can use the same tests, the same instructional methods, the same standards, and the same benchmarks with your ELLs as with your other students (Gersten et al., 2007). Although it certainly is true that there are many similarities between learning to read in English as one's first or a second language, there also are key differences (August & Shanahan, 2006). When the differences are downplayed, teachers and others might misunderstand why their ELLs are not progressing as rapidly as their English-speaking peers when taught with the same methods. They might mistakenly assume that they are not as capable. English language learners share common challenges when learning to read English as a second or additional language that can mirror the characteristics of LD (see Table 6.1).

### **Phonological Awareness**

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 or to pronounce them.

# CHAPTER 7

## *How Can Schools Establish Structures to Facilitate the Process for Distinguishing Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities?*

This chapter addresses:

- The importance of collaborative teaming in decision making for ELLs
- Considerations for data teams and problem-solving teams
- Roles of key educators in the decision-making process for ELLs

In order to more accurately make the distinction between language acquisition and learning disabilities, it is necessary for schools and districts to have certain structures and processes in place for collaboration and effective decision making. The implementation of a multitiered instruction and assessment model such as response to intervention (RTI) facilitates a more equitable process of identifying struggling learners, especially when they are ELLs. We have learned valuable lessons from multitier models shown to be effective in reducing inappropriate referrals of ELLs to special education (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007) in addition to lessons learned from our own work with university-school partnerships. Essential to adequately making the distinction between language acquisition and learning disabilities within a multitiered framework are structures that incorporate collaborative teaming, data-driven and problem-solving processes, effective professional development, shared leadership, and clearly defined roles.

### **Collaborative Teaming**

Collaborative structures in education—teachers working in collaborative groups—have been shown to have fewer referrals to special education than noncollaborative structures (Chalfant, 1989; Fuchs et al., 1990; Pugach & Johnson, 1995), especially for minority students (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). Historically, school teams have faced challenges in collecting and interpreting student information to make valid instructional and evaluative

# CHAPTER 8

## *How Are Families Involved in the Process?*

This chapter addresses:

- Parent’s rights—what IDEA says
- Challenges and barriers to parent involvement
- Framework for involving families and parents
- Suggestions and solutions

### **Parents’ Rights—What IDEA Says**

It is important to include the families of ELLs as valued partners in their child’s learning process. Families should be involved as early as possible and at multiple levels; they should be notified early when a child seems to be struggling and asked for their input. Federal law (i.e., Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, 2006) specifies that families must be involved when a school is considering whether to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of a student. Families’ rights of participation include

- The right to participate in meetings related to the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of the student.
- The right to participate in meetings related to the provision of a free appropriate public education.
- The right to be included in any meeting the purpose of which is to decide whether their child is a “child with a disability” and meets eligibility criteria for special education and related services.
- The right to be included on any team that makes placement decisions for their child or that develops, reviews, and revises an individualized education program for their child. Schools must make every effort to ensure their participation, including meeting individually or via conference calls.
- The right to consent to the school providing special education services.

# CHAPTER 9

## *How Can We Tell Which ELLs Should Be Referred for a Comprehensive Evaluation?*

This chapter addresses:

- Steps to take when deciding whether to refer an ELL student for consideration of special education eligibility
- Data analysis and the importance of comparing ELL students to “true peers”
- Distinguishing between responders and nonresponders

In this chapter, we discuss the natural progression of steps that will help you decide whether an ELL warrants an official referral for special education evaluation. As a rule, you should be taking the approach that the student’s struggles may be caused by external factors rather than internal factors and maintain this hypothesis until the data suggest otherwise. You must ensure appropriate referrals of ELLs at your school because “most students referred for consideration of special education are eventually placed in special education programs” (Hosp & Reschly, 2003, p. 10).

### **ELL Response to Schoolwide Instructional Approach (Tier 1) and Interventions (Tiers 2 and 3)**

To determine which ELLs to refer for an evaluation, a useful rule of thumb is to look at how many ELLs are struggling in a class or across classes at a particular grade level. If the majority of ELLs are making little progress, then the focus should be on improving instruction and making sure it is appropriate for ELLs. By looking at class sets of data you can determine if there are patterns across groups of student learning or if a few students are struggling due to other factors. If most ELLs are doing well and only a few are struggling, it is suitable to look more closely at what is going on with those individual students and consider that they may have a disability. The first step is to observe the classroom.

# CHAPTER 10

## *What Does It Mean to Use an Ecological Framework to Determine Whether ELLs Have LD?*

This chapter addresses:

- The definition of an ecological framework for ELLs
- Types of assessments and their purposes in distinguishing language acquisition and LD
- Considerations for assessing ELLs

In the field of special education, the long-time use of a discrepancy model for identifying students with LD fostered a deficit approach to learning. The discrepancy model focused attention on a student's inability to succeed in the general education classroom without considering the many environmental factors that have a major influence on academic or behavioral success. Some educators might have felt that an LD classification would at least get their students the support they needed outside of the general education classroom. However, problems associated with inappropriate classification and placement based on this model include being denied access to the general education curriculum, being placed in separate programs with more limited curriculum, and being stigmatized.

A shift toward a more comprehensive, ecological approach ensures a more equitable process of identifying students who truly have special education needs—and this includes ELLs. An *ecological framework* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) considers contextual factors that can affect a student's performance as well as intrinsic factors. Such a framework for evaluating ELLs should have four elements:

1. 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).
2. Information gathered through a variety of informal and formal assessments.
3. Examination of the appropriateness of classroom instruction and the classroom context based on knowledge of individual student factors (see discussion in Chapter 4).
4. Nondiscriminatory interpretation of all assessment data.