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Distinguishing Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disabilities Among English Language Learners

Background Information

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First, who are English language learners? English language learners (ELLs) are students who speak a language other than English as their first language and who are in the process of acquiring English as a second or additional language. They are not yet fully proficient in English. For this reason, we might refer to them as "emerging bilinguals." Some are immigrants; others were born in the United States. Their demographic characteristics vary widely. In this chapter, we begin with a comprehensive overview of the changing demographics associated with ELLs in today's schools, providing a summary by Garcia (2004) of ELL demographics as a backdrop to the discussions that follow in subsequent chapters regarding the linguistic and literacy development of ELLs. We then present a brief

description of the phenomenon of disproportionate representation, next describe learning disabilities, and finish the chapter with an overview of what we know from research about distinguishing between learning disabilities and language acquisition among ELLs.

ELL DEMOGRAPHICS

Garcia (2004) characterized the presence of ELLs in this nation as "large-scale . . . with no signs of abating soon" (p. 13). Immigrants now comprise approximately 11 percent of the U.S. population, the highest percentage in 70 years (Garcia, 2001). According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the immigrant population in the United States tripled from 1970 to 2000, increasing from 9.6 to 28.4 million immigrants. "Immigration accounts for virtually all of the national increase in public school enrollment over the last two decades. In 2000, there were 8.6 million school-aged children from immigrant families in the United States" (Garcia, 2004, p. 10). Over 4 million students enrolled in public schools were not yet fully proficient in English in the 1999–2000 school year, or 9.3 percent of the total public school student enrollment (Kendler, 2002). Demographic figures show the ELL population has more than doubled over the past decade.

In addition, the 2000 U.S. Census reported that 46,951,595 individuals ages 5 or older spoke a language other than English at home. This was a 47 percent increase in numbers reported in the 1990 U.S. Census. "Expected" growth occurred in states with a historically large representation of diverse populations, such as California (103 percent), Arizona (75 percent), and Texas (51 percent). There was also "unexpected" growth in states such as Georgia (164 percent), North Carolina (150 percent), and Arkansas (103 percent). While students speak many different languages in public schools, Spanish remains the language most frequently spoken by individuals who speak a language other than English in the United States, representing 75 percent of children with emerging English proficiency (Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Garcia, 2004; Special Issues Analysis Center, 1995). See Table 1.1 for a list of the most commonly spoken languages other than English in U.S. schools.

Immigrant ELLs vary in the extent to which they attended schools in their home countries. Garcia (2004) pointed out that "recent immigrants with high levels of education are disproportionately from several nations in east and south Asia, while those with little schooling are largely from a number of Latin American countries" (p. 14). In the United States, Mexicans represent the largest immigrant group and one of the least educated, which is significant to U.S. schools because children from families with high levels

Table 1.1 Top Ten Languages Spoken By Linguistically Diverse Populations in the United States

Rank (estimate)	Language	English Language Learners (estimate)	% of English Language Learners (estimate)
1	Spanish	3,598,451	79.045%
2	Vietnamese	88,906	1.953%
3	Hmong	70,768	1.555%
4	Chinese, Cantonese	46,466	1.021%
5	Korean	43,969	0.966%
6	Haitian Creole	42,236	0.928%
7	Arabic	41,279	0.907%
8	Russian	37,157	0.816%
9	Tagalog	34,133	0.750%
10	Navajo	27,029	0.594%

of education tend to have higher academic achievement than those from families with little formal education (Garcia, 2004; Rumbaut, 1997).

Garcia (2004) also identified trends in the economic and environmental conditions in which English language learners live. "Of the 21.9 million children less than six years of age in 1998 . . . five million (25%) were living in poverty" (p. 1). Over 50 percent of non-White children were living in poverty; 72 percent lived in racially isolated neighborhoods. The poverty rate for immigrants is 50 percent higher than for those born in the United States, and immigrants comprise 22 percent of all persons living in poverty (Camarota, 2001). Moreover, statistics show that the 100 districts with the largest numbers of children living in poverty house over 40 percent more children per school building than the nation's average, indicating disparities in schooling experiences faced by many non-White students in this nation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000).

The increase in the English language learner population continues to stymie practitioners because ELLs tend to underachieve in comparison with their White middle-class counterparts on indicators of academic success. For example, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; U.S. Department of Education, 2003), in 2003 only 15 percent of Hispanic students, 37 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 16 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students in the fourth grade read at proficient or advanced proficient levels (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005). In addition, in 2000, the U.S. Department of Education reported that the high school completion rate for

the general population (18–24 years of age) was approximately 86 percent. Hispanics lagged behind in high school completion in comparison to other racial groups, at 64.1 percent; Blacks were 83.7 percent, Whites 91.8 percent, and Asians 94.6 percent.

Hodgkinson (2005), a leading educational demographer, projects that if we were to spread ELLs around the country and in every classroom, one out of every nine students would be a second language learner. Demographers project that by the year 2025, this number will increase to one in every four students. The challenge today is "educating to high standards students from diverse language, culture, and social class groups" (Garcia, 2004, p. 5). Because the number of ELLs continues to grow at a rapid rate, it is more important than ever for schools to address misconceptions about how best to meet their needs, including minimizing potential cultural and/or linguistic mismatches between teacher and students.

Teacher Shortages

Supplying enough teachers who are prepared to teach ELLs is a challenge. According to the American Association for Employment in Education, a lack of qualified teachers for ELLs continues to plague school districts nationwide. Schools in every region of the United States report a shortage of both bilingual and ESL teachers, with the most significant shortages occurring in those states that have not traditionally had large immigrant populations (Barron & Menken, 2002).

ELLs and their families look to teachers to meet their needs and help them to be successful in our nation's schools, assisting them in the attainment of the "American Dream" (Ladson-Billings, 2005). When there are significant differences between the student's culture and the school's culture, teachers can easily misread students' aptitudes, intent, or abilities because of variations in styles of language use and interactional patterns. Secondly, when such cultural differences exist, teachers may utilize styles of instruction and/or discipline that are at odds with community norms (Delpit, 1995, p. 167).

Added to a lack of cultural awareness, many teachers have received little or no training in English as a second language (ESL), English language acquisition, or bilingual/bicultural education (Menken & Antunez, 2001), leading to a teaching force that is inadequately prepared to face the growing challenge of educating culturally and linguistically diverse learners. According to a 1999 NCES Report, teachers were least likely to report being very prepared for (1) integrating educational technology into the grade or subject taught, (2) addressing the needs of limited English proficient or culturally diverse students, and (3) addressing the needs of students

with disabilities. Since teachers have the main responsibility and play an integral role in the education of ELLs, their preparation is crucial to student success.

Culturally and linguistically diverse teachers can have a positive effect on the increasingly diverse student population (Foster, 1993; Merino & Quintanar, 1989). However, while the number of ELLs is dramatically increasing, the number of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers is decreasing. The dwindling minority teaching force, combined with the lack of qualified personnel to meet the needs of the diverse population in our nation's schools, has resulted in a "mismatch" between the teaching force and diverse student populations. For this reason, it is especially important to provide resources to practicing teachers so that they can enhance their knowledge about teaching ELLs.

ELLS AND DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION

Disproportionate representation refers to "unequal proportions of culturally diverse students in special education programs" (Artiles & Trent, 2000, p. 514), and is often assessed by calculating a group's representation in a specific special education category in comparison with their proportion of the total school-aged population, or in reference to the representation of a comparison group, most often White students. There is no one agreed upon best way of determining disproportionate representation, and several procedures and formulas have been proposed and used throughout the history of this problem.[1] Whichever index we use, the disability categories in which we are mostly to see disproportionate representation are mental retardation, emotional/behavioral disorders, and LD. The most common ethnic groups involved in overrepresentation include African American, Chicano/Latino, American Indian, and a few subgroups of Asian American students (see Artiles & Trent, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002).

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1. The *risk index,* or RI, is calculated by dividing the number of students in a given racial or ethnic category served in a given disability category by the total enrollment for that group in the school population. Thus, a risk index of six for African American students in a given category means that 6 percent of all African Americans were given that label. The *composition index* is calculated by dividing the number of students of a given racial or ethnic group enrolled in a particular disability category by the total number of students (summed across all groups) enrolled in that same disability category. The sum of composition indices for all the groups will total 100 percent. This index does not control for the baseline enrollment of a given group. Finally, the *odds ratio* divides the risk index of one group by the risk index of another (most often White) for comparative purposes. Odds ratios greater than 1.0 indicate greater risk of identification.

Concerns about disproportionate representation focus on the "judgmental" categories of special education, or, in other words, those disabilities usually identified by school personnel rather than a medical professional after the child has started school (Klingner et al., 2005). The school personnel making placement decisions typically exercise wide latitude in deciding who qualifies for special education through a process that is quite subjective (Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Notably, overrepresentation does not exist in low-incidence disability categories (such as visual, auditory, or orthopedic impairment; Donovan & Cross, 2002).

When we examine changes in special education identification over the years, one of the most striking findings is the "epidemic" increase in the risk of children of all racial/ethnic groups except Asian/Pacific Islanders for the LD category (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 47). Looking at current national averages, Hispanic/Latino students are only slightly overrepresented in programs for students with LD (Klingner et al., 2005). However, placement rates vary widely across states and districts. In some schools, Latino students are actually underrepresented in LD programs based on what would be expected given their percentage in the overall school population. In other schools, they are overrepresented. Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higareda (2005) examined placement patterns in special education programs in 11 urban districts in California with high proportions of ELLs and high poverty levels. They found that ELLs were not overrepresented in LD in the primary grades, but were overrepresented in grades five and higher. Secondary level ELLs were almost twice as likely to be placed in special education than their peers. Furthermore, ELLs in English Immersion programs, where there was no primary language support, were almost three times more likely to be identified for special education than ELL students in bilingual classrooms. This work suggests that specific patterns become obscured when data are aggregated above district levels (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). It also suggests the need to broaden examinations of disproportionate representation to include language proficiency in addition to ethnicity.

There are numerous possible reasons for disproportionate representation (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Because ELLs tend to underachieve in comparison with their mainstream counterparts, this puts pressure on practitioners to find ways to give the ELL student extra assistance to help close the achievement gap. Practitioners may perceive that special education is the only viable option for providing this support and refer the child to special education, or mistakenly assume that the student's struggles are due to LD rather than a normal consequence of the language acquisition process. These actions can result in the placement of students in special education

who do not truly have LD. On the other hand, some practitioners may be fearful of referring ELLs into special education because they believe it is wrong to refer students before they are fully proficient in English, or they might assume that a student's struggles are due to language acquisition when in fact the student does have LD. When this happens, students who have LD go without services and continue to struggle with the general education curriculum. These different kinds of inappropriate decisions characterize the complexities of disproportionate representation among ELLs.

THE EVOLVING LEARNING DISABILITIES CATEGORY

What are learning disabilities? Over the past four decades, definitions of LD and terminology have evolved (see Table 1.2; Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2004). After more than 40 years of discussions and advocacy, the field of LD continues to struggle to develop an operational (working) definition.

The origin of the LD definition lies in the traditional medical model of disabilities. The field has considered LD a condition needing diagnosis that is centered within the child rather than in the educational environment (Doris, 1993). This model is a deficit-based approach (Gallego, Zamora-Duran, & Reyes, 2004). In the early 1960s, Samuel Kirk (1962) coined the term "learning disability." Bateman (1965) was dissatisfied with Kirk's definition and developed a different one that was the first to refer to an IQ-achievement discrepancy. This was the beginning of 40 decades of implementation of the IQ discrepancy-based model, which classified students with LD based on a significant difference between potential and actual academic performance.

At the time, the model was validated by Rutter and Yule's (1975) research, which classified two types of impaired readers based on associations between IQ (potential) and achievement (actual performance). In other words, Rutter and Yule found a cluster of impaired readers at the low end of the scale who seemed to share common characteristics and could be categorized as having reading disabilities because they demonstrated significant discrepancies between expected and observed reading scores. The researchers defined the second type of impaired reader as having "general reading backwardness." These students did not demonstrate a discrepancy between expected and observed reading skills but instead exhibited general learning problems. Years later researchers determined that Rutter and Yule's research was flawed, and there had appeared to be a cluster of impaired readers because of problems with testing procedures (e.g., Stuebing et al., 2002). In fact, students' reading and IQ scores fall along a continuum—there is no cluster at the bottom of the scale.

Table 1.2   Historical Timeline of Key LD Definitions

- 1962 Samuel Kirk: A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subject resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors. (Kirk, 1962, p. 263)
- 1965 Barbara Bateman: Children who have learning disorders are those who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated potential and actual level of performance related to basic disorders in the learning process, which may or may not be accompanied by demonstrable central nervous system dysfunction, and which are not secondary to generalized mental retardation, educational or cultural deprivation, severe emotional disturbance, or sensory loss. (Bateman, 1965, p. 220)
- 1977 U.S. Department of Education: The term "specific learning disability" (SLD) means a disorder in one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term does not include children who have LD that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (U.S. Office of Education, 1977, p. 65,083)
- 1981 National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities: Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, & Larsen, 1981, p. 336)
- 1997 & 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): The term "specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.
  - **Disorders Included**—Conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.
  - **Disorders Not Included**—Learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (IDEA Amendments of 1997, Sec. 602(26), p. 13)
  - IDEA 2004 maintains the SLD definitions found in IDEA 1997 and earlier versions of the law; however, it seeks to update and improve the criteria for SLD identification and eligibility by eliminating the requirement that students must exhibit a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in order to be found eligible for services under IDEA (regardless of age). Instead, states may consider how a student responds to research-based interventions when making eligibility determinations.

In 1975, Congress passed PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). This is the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 1991, 1997, 2004). However, it was not until 1977 that the U.S. Office of Education put forth a definition of LD (see Table 1.2). This conceptual definition became the most commonly used in the United States' public education system. It is important to note that the federal government never explicitly or clearly explained the LD definition or stated how to operationalize it to identify children for special education. Thus, they left state and local educational agencies to figure this out on their own. Rather, the federal government assumed that the definition would provide a theoretical framework for use in identification (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Since the initial passage of EAHCA in 1975, intermittent amendments have passed without any major changes to the LD definition. This lack of clarification and difficulties reaching consensus continue to pose challenges in developing LD identification criteria (Gallego, Zamora-Duran, & Reyes, 2004).

In 1978, several major LD professional organizations along with the Adults and Children with Learning and Developmental Disabilities Organizations (ACLD) formed the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) to attempt to provide a united front in addressing issues pertaining to LD (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). In 1981, NJCLD put forth its own definition of LD (see Table 1.2). Notably there was no mention of psychological processes in this definition. The committee omitted this because of negative reactions to the perceptual-motor training programs in the field at that time (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2004).

Reformation efforts continued through the 1980s by various organizations that were unhappy with the federal definition. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Education continued to fund studies to solidify the federal definition and develop effective methods for identification based on it. Despite NJCLD's strong position and the popularity in some circles of their alternative definition, the federal LD definition remained intact with the reauthorization of the Individuals with Education Act of 1997.

As the new millennium began, the IQ-discrepancy criteria were under increasing scrutiny. In 2001, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) sponsored the LD Initiative Summit to discuss various aspects of LD (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2004). The purpose of this summit was to develop an LD research synthesis that could provide useful information mainly to practitioners when making decisions concerning identifying students with LD. There were eight major points generated at this summit. As shown in Table 1.3, the results from the summit indicated that the discrepancy-based model was insufficient and ineffective for identifying students with LD and that further research needed conducting on the

discrepancy-based model in order to verify its validity (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes). When Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004, the LD definition remained the same. However, the law did incorporate the Summit's recommendations regarding LD identification procedures. By far the most dramatic change was the elimination of the requirement that a student show a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and academic achievement in order to qualify as having LD.

Table 1.3   Learning Disability Initiative Summit: Eight Major Consensus Statements

1. Concept of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)—Research evidence supports the validity of SLD as an intrinsic disorder of learning and cognition—"LD is not socially constructed."

2. Students with an SLD have the right to receive special education and related services at no cost.

3. SLD is lifelong condition—Students' needs with SLD extend beyond the classroom.

4. SLD prevalence is unknown—However, 6 percent of students receive instruction and resources that require special education.

5. Continued discrepancy between IQ and achievement—There are opposing arguments on this issue. However, the majority opinion supports that a discrepancy is unnecessary and insufficient for identifying LD. The minority opinion supports the discrepancy-based model for identifying LD, but they believe it is not sufficient to verify underachievement.

6. Processing deficits—Some deficits have been linked to SLD.

7. Effective Interventions—Effective interventions for SLD students are effective with consistency, appropriate intensity, and fidelity.

8. Response to Intervention (RTI)—Alternative methods must be developed to identify students with SLD. RTI is an alternative model that is the most promising method of alternative identification that can also promote effective school practices and help close the gap between identification and treatment.

The LD Definition and ELLs

The characteristics of LD and second language acquisition can appear quite similar. For this reason, practitioners have assessed and diagnosed many ELLs as having LD when they may not have actually had disabilities. Over the years, a growing number of ELLs have met the requirements for LD. Yet the LD definition and identification criteria have not adequately taken into account students' linguistic and sociocultural differences, limiting their usefulness with ELLs (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2004).

Presently, many practitioners continue to look for a discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more areas related to language processing skills when determining placement into special education. On one side, many practitioners believe that the discrepancy-based model is the foundation of the LD diagnosis, while on the other side many practitioners favor a more ecologically based identification process.

Many researchers and practitioners question if assessment and identification practices take into account students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2004). As long as federal regulations do not specify how to identify LD in ELLs and states must design their own LD identification criteria, practitioners will struggle with identification procedures. Because LD identification criteria vary widely from state to state, a student may be LD in one state but not in another. These challenges are compounded when the student is an ELL.

WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH ON ELLS WITH LD

Klingner, Artiles, and Mendez-Barletta (2006) reviewed and summarized research on ELLs who struggle with reading and who may have LD. They wanted to find out what we know from research about how to differentiate between ELLs who are struggling because they are not yet fully proficient in English and ELLs who have actual LD. Their goal was to develop recommendations for practitioners.

Research indicates that language acquisition is a complicated process influenced by many factors, including but not limited to the sociocultural environment, language proficiency in the first language, attitudes, personality, and perceived status of the native language in comparison with English. They found that cultural conflict and affective considerations such as motivation appear to be of critical importance when considering why students might be struggling, but that practitioners often overlook these factors. Behaviors that appear to indicate LD might be normal for the child's cultural background or be a by-product of the acculturation process. Practitioners involved in referral and placement decision making should consider various characteristics in relation to a child's culture, language, and acculturation. Similarly, they should consider the learning context when considering why a student is not thriving.

Research also suggests that in many cases psychologists and others involved in evaluating ELLs for possible special education placement tend to ignore or give insufficient attention to the native languages of the children they are testing. They often use English language tests even when a student's background warrants bilingual testing, and tend not to

consider whether the unexpected underachievement of ELLs can be explained by their limited English proficiency.

Factors that correlate with later reading achievement in English, or in the student's native language, include phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabetic knowledge. Rapid naming also plays a role. These early predictors of reading show promise for identifying ELLs who may benefit from additional literacy instruction in the general education environment before referring them to special education, as in an RTI model.

The most promising early intervention programs seem to be those that combine phonological awareness and other reading activities with ESL strategies. Native language support is also beneficial. Other promising practices focus on teaching ELLs reading comprehension strategies.

Klingner et al. (2004) found that more and less proficient readers differ from each other in significant ways. Struggling readers focus more on surface aspects of reading, use fewer comprehension strategies, tap less into background knowledge, and have more limited vocabularies. Yet, importantly, they are able to transfer strategies from their native language to English reading. Also noteworthy is that standardized reading tests may underestimate what ELLs know and can do.

More research is still needed to help us better understand how ELLs with and without disabilities differ as they become bilingual and biliterate. By understanding the characteristics of subpopulations of students with different profiles, the educational community could develop better identification tools and procedures to address disproportionate representation and more accurately determine which students are most likely to benefit from special education services.

CONCLUSION

Practitioners who educate ELLs continue to face challenges as the field of LD struggles to (a) establish an acceptable definition; (b) clarify conceptual and operational frameworks for developing adequate assessments and interventions, particularly for ELLs; and (c) transition from a discrepancy-based identification approach to an RTI model. Although the research base on ELLs who struggle with reading is incomplete, practitioners can still learn much that can inform decisions about how best to assess and teach ELLs. It is through these efforts that ELLs who struggle to read will receive appropriate instruction and inappropriate referrals and placement into special education will be reduced.