

Looking into ELL Classrooms: Language Acquisition or Learning Disabilities?

What is a learning disability (LD)?

IDEA (2004):

“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 the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.” (Garcia & Tyler, 2010)

Q: Does it mean the student is unintelligent or simply lazy?

A: No, there are students with average or higher than average intelligence that struggle with learning all basic skills (Padgett, 1998). Because of the lack of skills, the students may appear as inactive, lacking in self-monitoring skills, and inefficient in using strategies of learning. (Garcia & Tyler, 2010)

Q: What is the science behind it?

A: Actually, research has shown that it is a neurological disorder; or in other words, the brain is “wired” differently. Difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, recalling, and/or organization may root from the lack of skills. Unlike diseases, it cannot be cured or fixed. However, it may be mitigated with proper support and intervention (LDonline.com).

Q: What are some examples of learning disabilities?

A: Research so far has discovered a few common learning disabilities: dyslexia (reading disability), dyscalculia (mathematical disability), dysgraphia (writing disability), auditory and visual processing disorders, and nonverbal disorders (problems visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative, and holistic functions). (LDonline.com)

Q: What indicates a learning disability?

A: Even though learning disabilities are not always outwardly visible (Gunderson, 2001), when students do not perform well after years of instruction in language acquisition and content area, it can be inferred that that a learning disability may be present (McCardle, 2005).

Significance of Study

What is the importance of study ELL students with disabilities?

As the stages in the natural development of learning a second language may resemble signs of a learning disability (Case & Taylor, 2005), confusion in identification may inevitably arise among teachers and students. Even though

“ELL students appear to be underrepresented overall on special education rosters, ELL students tend to be overrepresented in certain special education categories: Speech-Language Impairment, Mental Retardation, and Emotional Disturbance.” (McCardle, 2005)

Due to the nature of complexity in the identification of students with LD, there is an absence of methods for accurate identification and consistent definition of LDs across schools and districts, as well as tools and qualified staff (McCardle, 2005). Because of the shortage of resources, ELL students who do require special education services are disadvantaged as their needs in both language and disability are not met (Ortiz, 2001). Moreover, learning disability is a social construct; depending on the cultural expectations, what is defined as a learning disability differs according to the context and criteria used. (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006)

Furthermore, an incorrect label is detrimental to students' learning, whether they are with or without LD. For those who are falsely identified with LD, the consequence of the label may be a self-fulfilling prophecy of low academic achievements (Cline & Shamsi, 2000). As for the ELLs who do have LD, if teachers assume that difficulties stem from the lack of proficiency with the language, they are overlooked for remedial services, and thus suffer without the proper help required to succeed (Lesaux, 2006).

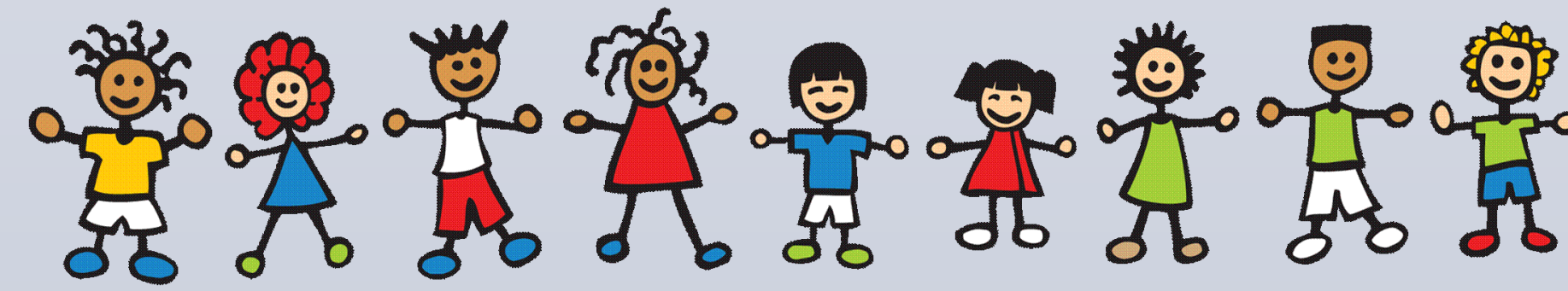
Since the aforementioned issues cannot truly be solved without a change in the education system, other measures should be taken to help teachers without special training to have a general idea of differentiating between language acquisition and learning disabilities in order to accommodate the needs of ELL students with LD.

Understanding ELL Students with LD

“Stanovich (1986) describes the ‘Matthew Effect,’ a ‘the rich gets richer while the poor gets poorer’ phenomenon, wherein those who acquire early literacy skills have the tools to exponentially grow in their knowledge and skills while those who fail to develop early skills fall further and further behind...” (Haager & Windmueller, 2001)

Then, what are the needs of the ELL students with LD? What can both teachers and students do in order to avoid falling behind?

- Most importantly, students with LD need to be identified! Better tools and methods with greater quality, consistency and accuracy for identification of those with specific, special educational needs are vital (McCardle, 2005).
- When formal testing are unavailable, students need teachers to observe, collect data and interpret findings (Case & Taylor, 2005).
- Since many students are unaware of their own cognitive processes, they need to understand how to learn efficiently. Usually, ELL students with LD have the most trouble with reading. (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996).
- Both teachers and students need to learn which skills are necessary for reading to become automatized (Cline & Shamsi, 2000).
- Students need to develop oral language competence as it is strongly linked to reading comprehension (Lipka & Siegel, 2007).
- Lastly, the first language needs to be valued. A stronger foundation of the first language reflects on the learning of the second language. (Klingner, Artiles, & Barletta, 2006).



BICS	CALPS
• Stands for “Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills”	• Stands for “Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency”
• Body language and emotions; physical objects	• Reading and listening without visuals
• Understand with contextual support	• Understand communication without contextual support
• Takes 1-2 years to develop	• Takes 4-7 years to develop

(Hudson, Smith, & Smith, 2001; Ranney, 2012)

The Process of Language Acquisition

(Ernst-Slavit, Moore, & Maloney, 2002)

Stage I: Pre-production

- “Silent period”: observe and watch others carefully
- Often communicate with gestures, actions, and verbal formulas
- Build receptive vocabulary and recycled vocabulary

Stage II: Early production

- Intuitively understand English is a system of rules, patterns, and sound-symbol relationships
- Begin to give one- or two- word responses
- Speak in small chunks of social language (e.g., no, thanks)

Stage III: Speech emergence

- Demonstrate comprehension
- Use language purposefully (e.g., to clarify, refuse, request)
- Produce complete sentences
- Make personal connections to concepts

Stage IV: Intermediate fluency

- Can engage in conversations
- Produce connective narratives
- Use reading and writing activities to acquire new information

Language Acquisition vs. Learning Disabilities



For indication of learning disabilities, some questions to ask are:

- Has the problem persisted over time?
- Does the problem interfere with academic progress?
- Does the problem improve with instruction?
- Is there an irregular pattern of success?
- Does the same problem appear in the native language?
- Is there a family history of reading difficulties?

(Case & Taylor, 2005; Chu & Flores, 2011; Litt, 2008; Scott & Manglitz, 2000)

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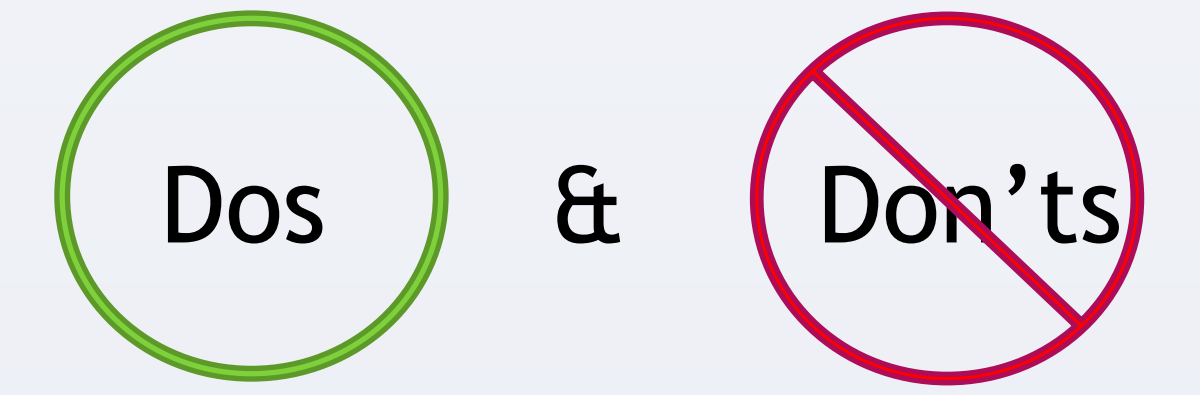
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Useful Initial Teaching Strategies

Tips & Techniques

Since there is a lack of resources in special needs education, here is a compiled list of ways that teachers may utilize to cope with the situations in the classrooms. These tips and techniques are beneficial not only to ELL students with LD, but also enhances learning for other ELL students.



1. Provide a list of common school vocabulary and concepts.
2. Incorporate students' native languages in the materials.
3. Allow students to use native languages.
4. Use lots of repetition and paraphrasing.
5. Avoid using idiomatic expressions.
6. Pronounce words clearly and slowly.
7. Give longer wait time for processing information.
8. Present tasks in the order of which it will be performed.
9. Encourage social interaction as well as independent learning.
10. Use music and literature from home countries.
11. Review, review, review!
12. Create a strong relationship between letter and sounds in the English alphabet system.
13. Draw on students' preferred or stronger modalities.
14. Teach study skills, self-monitoring skills, and other various strategies.
15. Increase opportunities for oral language development.
16. Utilize visual aids (e.g., props, pictures, gestures, facial expressions).
17. Encourage the development of the first language.
18. Avoid putting your hands in front of your face.
19. Turn off unnecessary machines that create background noise.
20. Beware of meaning of gestures in different cultures.
21. Emphasize key points.
22. Work on recalling, summarizing, and predicting.
23. Provide answer and feedback in forms of further questions.

