

Assessing English Language Learners for a Learning Disability or a Language Issue

Sarah Mariah Fisher

Abstract

This paper aims to increase awareness about English language learners (ELLs) who have difficulty with learning English as a result of a learning disability. I first look at what factors often lead to the misdiagnosis of learning disability. I then include an evaluation checklist for teachers who notice that an ELL is not learning at the same rate as his or her peers. Teachers who are aware of their ELLs' backgrounds and the expected progress of language learning will be better equipped to diagnose students correctly and offer them the help that is needed.

Introduction

Too often English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities fall through the cracks. These learners may be thought of as slow English learners, or they may be in a school district that does not have enough resources to test them in their L1 for learning disabilities. On the flipside are the English learners who are identified as learning disabled and placed in special education classes when in fact, they are not learning disabled. Both categories of English learners, those that do have a learning disability and those that do not but are wrongly labeled as such, may keep moving through the school system without receiving the appropriate help that their native English counterparts are given. As a result, these learning disabled learners will continue to have difficulties, and once they graduate from high school (if they do), they will be at a disadvantage because of their undiagnosed learning disabilities. This issue is of concern to me because I want to work with school-age children, and the earlier that learning disabilities are diagnosed, the better chance these students will have in overcoming them.

This paper aims to review the literature in order to clarify the sometimes-murky factors that comprise the learning disabilities of ELLs. The questions guiding this literature review are:

1. Why are ELLs misdiagnosed or remain undiagnosed?
2. When learning a second language, what is considered normal and what is not? That is, what aspects will language learners likely exhibit in the process of learning?
3. What are some other factors that can play a role in determining whether a student has a learning disability or a language issue?
4. What factors go into assessing an ELL for a learning disability? In addition, how is the distinction between a learning disability or a language issue determined? Is there a way to correctly evaluate an ELL for a learning disability? How can the teacher correctly assess an English language learner for a learning disability?

Why ELLs Are Misdiagnosed

There are several misguided reasons as to why English language learners with a learning disability are often ignored. First and foremost is the issue of how to correctly diagnose an ELL. Geva (2000) observed that too often ELLs were placed in special education classes on the basis of “socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural factors rather than psychoeducational factors” (p. 14). The professionals who were used to dealing with and treating students in their L1 (English) were not trained or prepared for these different learners who had English as their L2. This inadequate preparation led to misinterpretation of the data that was collected to determine whether or not a student had a learning disability (Geva, 2000). In addition, Limbos and Geva (2001) found that a teacher’s unprompted referral solely based on personal observations were more inaccurate than when an ELL was tested for a learning disability. This type of referral shows that a teacher’s intuition is not a fool-proof way to diagnose ELLs since teachers may not have the experience and training needed to know if an ELL is having difficulties due to a language barrier or a learning disability. Fortunately, more research has been conducted to better understand the process of L2 learning and its relation to L1 learning. Better assessments and means of identification such as getting the thoughts of each of the student’s teachers, looking at a student’s background, and testing in a student’s L1 have been implemented so that there are fewer cases of misdiagnosed learning disabilities (Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005).

Another reason why ELLs with learning disabilities are often mis-

diagnosed is that it is believed that the process of how learners of English as a second language learn how to read is different from the process that is used when learning to read in an L1. This misbelief, the idea that a second language is somehow learned differently, may cause a teacher to assess, mistakenly, that a student’s learning problems are due to issues of second language learning rather than some learning disability. These teachers need to be informed that while it is true that some types of learning disabilities manifest themselves differently for various language groups, the belief that L1 and L2 learning processes are different is unfounded (Li, 2004). Geva (2000) found that native English learners and ELLs learning to read in English both progressed through their reading stages at the same pace. This information may help teachers to recognize learning disabilities for what they are rather than attributing them to second language learning issues.

Another mistake in assessing learning disabilities is to base one’s assessment on the learner’s language proficiency. There are many reasons why an ELL’s level of oral proficiency should not be the basis to decide that an ELL has a learning disability and not a language issue. One reason is that despite the fact that an ELL’s oral English proficiency has little influence on reading skills, it is often thought by those who do not have a language background that an ELL’s reading difficulties are a result of not being adequately proficient in English. While reading comprehension and oral proficiency are closely related, the two do not rely on each other. If ELLs are receiving adequate reading instruction and language exposure, they should still be able to decode words, sometimes better than they would in their L1 (Geva, 2000).

However, if an ELL comes from a family that uses the L1 at home and therefore is only exposed to English during school hours, the ELL may not be getting sufficient exposure to English. Lacking insufficient exposure can affect how quickly an ELL's English develops which, when compounded with a learning disability, could have a negative influence on how quickly an ELL is learning English (Spear-Swerling, 2006). Furthermore, Limbos and Geva (2001) found that teachers often erroneously base referrals for learning disabilities on an ELLs' oral proficiency, a referral that can be problematic if students are just starting to learn English, are not confident in their English abilities, or do not use much English outside of the school setting.

Often ELLs with a learning disability are not diagnosed for many years because of the belief that an ELL's English proficiency must be established first. Teachers who are unaware of the process of second language learning may attribute learning difficulties to the fact that the ELL just does not know enough English yet and is therefore having problems (Limbos & Geva, 2001). However, gaining second language proficiency can take as long as seven years during which time the student is not receiving any language instruction or help (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2005). In Geva's experience, teachers are more likely to attribute poor reading skills to an ELL's lack of English than to a potential learning disability (2000). There may also be a delay in diagnosis due to the fact that some teachers have the erroneous idea that there must be a noticeable discrepancy between what is expected of a learner at level X and what the learner has actually attained. Again, it may take several years

before this discrepancy becomes significant enough to raise red flags (Wagner, Francis, & Morris, 2005).

Determining between a Learning Disability and a Language Issue

It is best that the teacher is aware of the usual progress in second language learning so that the teacher can make an educated referral for an ELL with a potential learning disability. First, ELLs may have language problems due to transfer from their L1 or as a result of their ever-changing interlanguages. These concepts can help a teacher to understand why an ELL persists in making errors in spite of having been provided the correction (Dürmüller, n.d.; Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2005).

Language learners may also go through a silent period, according to the Natural Approach (Krashen, 1981), which, for the younger the learner, can last up to several months (Wilson, 2000). The silent period could be mistakenly diagnosed as a learning disability, but in fact, it is a time when the learner's focus is more on listening to analyze the nuances of the language. The usual progress of second language learning can be erroneously attributed to a learning disability, so in addition to teacher referral, there should be an evaluation by a specialist of learning disabilities (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2005).

Additionally, in an academic setting such as a school, it is normal for a student to command two types of language: the social language that students use with their peers, often referred to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and their academic language for homework, papers, and with teachers, called Cognitive Academic Language

Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 2003). A teacher may notice that the ELLs' social language is very good but their academic language is lacking and may thus think that these students have a learning disability. However, social language takes about two years to acquire whereas academic language can take up to seven years (Wilson, 2000). This gap between the two types of language is further problematic in that most tests that assess an ELL's English level are based on social language. Therefore, an ELL can be labeled as fully proficient in English but still have difficulties with language for school subjects (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2005).

It is very important that teachers who have ELLs in their classes be aware of how a second language is learned. Many ESL teachers without this educational background may wrongly attribute language problems to a learning disability. Inaccurate diagnoses as to whether ELLs have a learning disability can be very harmful to the student's learning.

Other Factors to be Considered in Diagnosing Learning Disabilities

There are many other reasons why an ELL may not be progressing in their English learning as quickly as their peers. Two reasons that can affect native and non-native English learners alike are vision and hearing problems. Many elementary schools screen students for vision and hearing on a yearly basis. However, once students get into high school, these screenings become more infrequent, and an ELL who starts school at this age is at a disadvantage from his or her elementary counterparts.

Linse (2008) noted several reasons why ELLs are more at risk for vision and hearing problems (p. 28). Besides the obvious case of missing the school screenings, there is also the possibility that the screeners are not trained to deal with language barriers that they may confront the ELL students or their parents. There are also the cases where vision and hearing problems are a result of issues in the ELL's native country—untreated ear infections from lack of health care or financial issues or from being exposed to loud noises, such as in countries of civil unrest.

Teachers are able to request re-tests if students miss screenings, and there are a wealth of organizations that can help students who do not have the financial means for new glasses or hearing aids. Teachers can also make adjustments in their classrooms. Nearsighted students will be able to see better if they sit in the front of the room closer to the chalkboard. For learners with hearing problems, written instructions in addition to clearly spoken instructions while facing the student can help (Linse, 2008).

It can be more difficult to point to the source of the ELLs' learning problems without looking into their backgrounds. One student at a high school that I observed seemed to lag behind his classmates in his English skills. Part of his problem was most likely the fact that he had only attended school sporadically in his native country and had never been exposed to English before moving here like most of his classmates. Not only did this student lack English skills, but he also lagged behind his peers in social and other basic academic skills. His teachers did not think that this student had a learning disability as he was

able to complete his homework satisfactorily. Knowing and/or learning about the student's background, his teacher was able to recommend after-school English tutoring in an attempt to help him attain the level of his classmates instead of having him tested for a learning disability. Reconfirming these actions, Linse (2008) suggested that teachers be aware of a student's background and meet with the parents to form a partnership for the student's success. Parents are new to the culture, too, and may not be aware of the fact that school attendance is mandatory.

Another important reason that the teachers should be aware of their ELLs' background is to find out if the ELLs have a learning disability in their L1 (Linse, 2008). If the ELL was diagnosed with an L1 learning disability, then essentially, questioning whether the problem's source is a language issue or a learning disability is effectively answered, and the correct support and remedy can begin. Additionally, if the learning problems are the same in both the student's L1 and L2, then the problem can be ascribed to a learning disability rather than a language issue (Litt, n.d.).

If these ELLs were never diagnosed with a learning disability in their native countries, but are still not making progress in their English skills, the ELLs should be tested at their present school in the U.S. At an elementary school that I observed, the teacher was concerned that two students were not progressing as quickly as another student who had a similar background in learning English. The teacher was able to have the two slower students tested in their L1 by a trained native speaker who was able to confirm that there were no learning disabilities but

only a reluctance to use English. In the case of students who are tested in their L1 and shown to have a learning disability, actions should be taken at that school to provide those students with the special education classes that they need so as not have them progress through the system untreated (Linse, 2008).

Identifying a Language Issue or Learning Disability

When ELLs are being tested to determine if they suffer from a language barrier or a learning disability, there are many aspects that must be assessed. Litt (n.d.) suggested five questions that must be taken into account when assessing an ELL (n.d.):

1. First, has the ELL's learning problem lasted for a long time? Over time, a language issue will improve if it is indeed a language issue, but a learning disability will not improve over time.
2. Second, does the learning problem still exist after the ELL is continually helped in that area? Again, a learning disability will not respond to this help and not improve.
3. Related to the second question is that of the ELLs academic progress. Are they improving academically because if not, that could point to a learning disability.
4. How are the ELL's skills in terms of strengths and weaknesses? Does the ELL favor some areas of learning over others (such as writing versus speaking skills)?
5. Finally, do students seem to understand one day and not the next? That could be the result of a learning disability, too, although the first four questions are the most pertinent in diagnosing a learning disability as a

changing language can be the result of students' interlanguages (Dürmüller, n.d.).

Litt also noted that language dominance and proficiency in both an ELL's L1 and English should be tested (n.d.). A problem that exists in both the L1 and English will likely be the result of a learning disability. Parents should be able to answer the questions for this part of the assessment.

What is important to remember when determining whether an ELL has a language issue or a learning disability is that action must be taken as soon as possible. The sooner that students are diagnosed, the sooner they can start receiving the necessary, accurate help because there are so many factors that may seem to point towards a learning disability, such as vision or hearing problems. However, it will also be helpful for the teacher and professional to have some history about the student in addition to the assessment's results gathered if the student is tested for a learning disability.

According to research by Geva (2000), it is better to be proactive when dealing with an ELL who exhibits difficulty with reading skills. Relying solely on an ELL's oral proficiency as a means of diagnosis can affect the promptness of correct evaluation. How well do the ELLs read in their L1? That may be a better way to look at a potential reading disability that may offer more insight than oral proficiency, especially if the ELL is going through a silent period (Geva, 2000).

Conclusion

The sooner that a student with a learning disability is diagnosed, the better. However, in the case of English learners, their lack of language skills may be

wrongly attributed to a learning disability, or they may be thought of as a slow learner and therefore, remain undiagnosed until it is too late. There are several reasons why ELLs go undiagnosed, such as the belief that a student's English proficiency must first be established. In addition, some teachers who are not trained to understand how second language learning takes place may think that the ELL is a slow learner or just has not yet acquired enough English. ELLs are sometimes misdiagnosed with a learning disability, too. These misdiagnoses can be a result of professionals not being trained to know how to identify the learning process of L2 learners.

Since learning disabilities are best treated earlier rather than later, it is important that all teachers involved with ELL students be aware of how they are coming along in their learning. It is also helpful to test ELLs in their L1, to see if a learning disability exists in the L1. Teachers can obtain more background information regarding an ELL's learning style from the parents. A correct diagnosis will allow the teacher and student to make the needed adjustments in teaching style and learning style.

References

- Cummins, J. (2003). Basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. Retrieved October 15, 2009, from www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/bicscalp.html
- Dürmüller, U. (n.d.). Interlanguage. Retrieved November 15, 2009, from <http://duermueller.tripod.com/interlanguage.html>

- Geva, E. (2000). Issues in the assessment of reading disabilities in L2 children—beliefs and research evidence. *Dyslexia*, 6(1), 13-28.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. London: Prentice-Hall International.
- Limbos, M., & Geva, E. (2001). Accuracy of teacher assessments of second-language students at risk for reading disability. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 34(2), 136-151.
- Linse, C. (2008). Language issue or learning disability? *Essential Teacher* 5(4), 28-30.
- Litt, S. (n.d.). Learning disability or language development issue? Retrieved March 25, 2009, from http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/special_education.php
- Li, R. (2004). National symposium on learning disabilities in English language learners. Retrieved March 26, 2009, from http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/ELL_summary.pdf
- Roseberry-McKibbin, C. & Brice, A. (2005). What's 'normal,' what's not: acquiring English as a second language. Retrieved March 28, 2009, from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/5126>
- Spear-Swerling, L. (2006). Learning disabilities in English language learners. Retrieved March 26, 2009, from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/21011>
- Wagner, R. K., Francis, D. J., & Morris, R. D. (2005). Identifying English language learners with learning disabilities: key challenges and possible approaches. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* 20(1), 6-15.
- Wilson, R. (2000). A summary of Stephen Krashen's "Principles and practice in second language acquisition". Retrieved October 15, 2009, from www.languageimpact.com/articles/rw/krashenbk.htm