ENGLISH LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE?

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What is Bilingual Special Education?

Regular Education

Special Education

Bilingual Education

## Activity

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PURPOSE

❖ To report on the analysis of 21 articles about English Learners (EL) with learning disabilities (LD).
❖ Results indicate that the following areas are important topics to consider with respect to the education of English learners with learning disabilities:
  ➢ Prevention and Early Intervention
  ➢ Referral and Decision Making
  ➢ Assessment Procedures
  ➢ Teaching Strategies
  ➢ Disproportionality & Overrepresentation
Some states have no policies or guidance regarding identifying LD in EL students (Scott, Boynton Hauerwas, & Brown, 2014).

Literature has also documented an overrepresentation of EL children in special education (Sullivan, 2011).

Hence, it is important for school psychologists to have access to and to be trained to use nondiscriminatory assessment procedures in order to distinguish between second language development and learning disabilities (Olvera, & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011).
The difficulty of accurately identifying LD in EL students is further complicated by the shortage of appropriate assessment tools for ELs and by the lack of staff who are multilingual and multiculturally competent (Zehler, Fleishman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stephenson, 2003).

A bilingual assessment needs to be conducted before bilingual children can be identified as having a LD.

This can be done by a bilingual school psychologist or by a monolingual school psychologist with an interpreter (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005).
BILINGUALISM

❖ Variations in degree of proficiency
  ➢ Non-balanced
  ➢ Balanced
  ➢ Mixed

❖ Sequential vs simultaneous

❖ Elective vs circumstantial

❖ The majority of bilingual students are non-balanced or mixed bilinguals with sequential and circumstantial bilingualism (Rhodes, Ochoa, & Ortiz, 2005).

Learning Disabilities

❖ 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 the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (IDEA, 1997).

❖ BICS vs CALP
Learning disabilities is the most prevalent disability for ELs (Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006).

It is essential that school psychologists remember the exclusionary clause of LD, which states that the learning problems experienced by the student cannot be primarily the result of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (IDEA, 1997).

The learning difficulties cannot be caused by or explained by environmental variables including second language acquisition (Barrera, 2006).

In order to distinguish between second language acquisition and learning disabilities, the school psychologist must assess language proficiency in all languages the child is exposed to because a learning disability is manifested in both the native (L1) and secondary (L2) language (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011).
English Learners with Learning Disabilities: What is the Current State?

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As the demographics across the United States continues to change, specifically with increases in school age English Learners who speak a home language other than English, it is imperative that schools meet the diverse needs of these children. This article summarizes studies about English Learners with learning disabilities. It reports on the analysis of 21 articles. Results indicate that the areas of prevention and early intervention, referral and decision making, assessment procedures, teaching strategies, and disproportionality and overrepresentation are important topics to consider with respect to the education of English Learners with learning disabilities.

Keywords: English learners, learning disabilities, bilingual assessment
**Methodology**

- We examined peer-reviewed studies related to English learners with disabilities. The studies reviewed in this article were selected by a two-step process consisting of
  1. searching for all articles that pertain to culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities; and
  2. applying selection criteria identified below to ensure the articles are recent, appropriate and, hence, should be included.
- Searches were completed using the ProQuest Education Journals Database, the EBSCO Host database, the PsycINFO database, and Google Scholar.
- Electronic database searches were followed by an ancestral search of the reference lists of relevant literature reviews and identified studies.
Table 1. Article Included in the Review Regarding Prevention and Early Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ortiz &amp; Yates (2001)</td>
<td>To propose a framework to guide special education services for CLD students, including policies and procedures that address disproportionality, as well as suggestions for referral, assessment, and teaching practices.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Prevention and early intervention are imperative and more cost effective than special education if students do not truly have disabilities (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

Ortiz and Yates (2001) recommend professional development for educators and assessment personnel to help inform them about the diverse characteristics and needs of ELs.

Schools should have high expectations; a challenging curriculum; embrace linguistic and cultural diversity; provide instruction that is supportive of native and second language development; and use systematic evaluation of student progress (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

Early intervention consists of intense supplementary instructional services that are provided early enough to help students quickly reach a level at which they can succeed in a general education classroom (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).
## Referral and Decision Making

### Table 2. Studies and Articles Included in the Review Regarding Referral and Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Huang, Clarke, Milczarzki, &amp; Raby (2011)</td>
<td>To discuss issues and concerns in the referral and assessment of ELs with LD, as well as suggest implications for educators and assessment professionals.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klingner &amp; Harry (2006)</td>
<td>To examine the referral and decision making process for referring ELs to special education by observing Child Study Team meetings and placement conferences.</td>
<td>CST meetings and placement conferences were observed for 19 EL students referred for special education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overton, Fielding, &amp; Simonsson (2004)</td>
<td>To examine the decision-making process in determining eligibility of CLD students with Learning Disabilities by providing four different hypothetical cases.</td>
<td>93 school psychologists reviewing four different cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, &amp; Kushner (2006)</td>
<td>To examine how a panel reviewing eligibility decisions made for 21 EL students with LD.</td>
<td>Panel of 3 school psychologists reviewing the cases of 21 students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Referral committees decide whether students will be assessed for special education (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

Overton, Fielding and Simonsson (2004) conducted a study with assessment personnel (school psychologists) who analyzed four hypothetical cases to determine eligibility for special education services. All cases were about a bilingual third grader named Ben who changed schools multiple times and struggled academically despite his effort and motivation. It was expected that the assessment personnel would defer making eligibility decisions because of language proficiency, environment, culture or lack of data. Results showed that 83% of the assessment personnel made an eligibility decision with insufficient data.

- Interestingly, responses to cases that provided language information and cases that did not provide language information were significantly different, with cases not providing language information more likely to be rated as eligible for special education. When language information was not provided, participants were less likely to consider language dominance or proficiency in their eligibility decisions for Ben.

- Some school psychologists listed the reason for eligibility as educational need, suggesting that assessment personnel might classify children as eligible for special education to ensure that they receive services since they are struggling academically.
While educators may believe there is no harm in placing ELs in special education for the extra individual instruction, research has demonstrated that students who were inappropriately placed in special education actually regressed (Huang et al., 2011).

Klingner and Harry (2006) observed Child Study Team meetings and placement conferences/multidisciplinary team meetings and found that most EL students were pushed toward testing because the school personnel believed that the poor academic performance or behavioral difficulties were indicative of the child needing special education services.

In another study reviewing eligibility decision making, Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson and Kushner (2006) found that a panel of three bilingual special education faculty members reviewed the cases of 21 EL students with LD and differed significantly in their eligibility decisions. This shows that experts in the field can reach different eligibility decisions.
Keeping this in mind, it is imperative that school personnel distinguish between three types of problems that the student may be facing.

- Type I problems are when students’ academic difficulties are caused by ineffective or inappropriate teaching-learning environments (Wilkinson et al., 2006).

- Type II problems arise when students’ academic problems become worse over time because instructional approaches never meet the child’s educational needs (Wilkinson et al.).

- Students with Type I and Type II problems should have their needs met in general education through support programs or adapted instruction since their problems are believed to be the result of the environment, and thus are not a true disability (Wilkinson et al.).

- On the other hand, students with Type III problems have educational needs that must be met by special education since they have disabilities and their needs cannot be addressed by general education alone (Wilkinson et al., 2006).
## Table 3. Studies and Articles Included in the Review Regarding Assessment Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrera (2006)</td>
<td>To explore the nature of the learning problems experienced by ELs who have learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu &amp; Flores (2011)</td>
<td>To discuss the issues with assessments utilized to identify ELs with LD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klingner &amp; Artiles (2003)</td>
<td>To address some of the challenges in the special education referral system when dealing with EL students and to provide suggestions for strengthening this process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macswan &amp; Rolstad. (2006)</td>
<td>To propose that EL language proficiency tests account for ELs’ disproportionate representation in special education by comparing how many students are identified as limited L1 students by two common tests and natural language measures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olvera &amp; Gomez-Cerrillo (2011)</td>
<td>To propose a bilingual assessment model based on CHC theory in the effort to better identify ELs with learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott, Boynton Hauerwas, Brown (2014)</td>
<td>To investigate how each state assesses and identifies LDs in CLD students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner, Francis, &amp; Morris (2005)</td>
<td>To review the literature and discuss challenges to assessment and identification of ELs with LD.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Assessment Procedures

❖ Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011) recommend using an assessment MODEL (Multiple sources of information, Observation, Data-driven hypothesis, English language development, and Language of assessment) when conducting a bilingual assessment.

❖ Multiple sources of info

➢ The beginning of the process should begin with a review of the student’s file by the school psychologist, with particular attention paid to any information regarding the student’s culture, language history, and language of instruction. Anecdotal notes, attendance records, behavioral logs, and achievement results should also be reviewed before the assessment. Thus, the assessment process begins with obtaining multiple sources of information that will give the assessment and results a context.

❖ Observation

➢ According to Olvera and Gomez-Cerrillo (2011), observations are imperative and should be conducted in multiple settings. As noted above, the literature has suggested that observations are not always included in the assessment process (Ochoa, Rivera, & Powell, 1997).
ASSessment PROCEDURES

❖ Data driven hypothesis

➢ Once the environmental factors are ruled out, the school psychologist should develop a data-driven hypothesis for assessment, which leads to the decision making process regarding the selection of the assessment tools to use.

➢ Barrera (2006) recommended that school psychologists not rely on standardized tests that did not include EL in the norming sample.

❖ English language development

➢ As for English language development, the school psychologist must assess the level of CALP in both languages. It is important not to make assumptions about the student’s English language development because some students may be able to converse in English (BICS), but would struggle with tests in English because they have yet to fully acquire CALP in English.

❖ Language of assessment

➢ Assessments are to be conducted in the dominant language of the student. Formal and informal measures should be used to determine the student’s dominant language (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).
Challenges in Special Education
Identification for ELLs

Dr. Alba Ortiz

Professor of Special Education and Director of the Office of Bilingual Education at University of Texas at Austin.

Video Clip
## Teaching Strategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cartledge &amp; Kourea (2008)</td>
<td>To demonstrate optimal learning environments for culturally diverse students with or at risk for disabilities that are grounded in the empirical literature and emphasize the cultural competence of teachers, culturally responsive effective instruction, and culturally appropriate development of social behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nguyen (2012)</td>
<td>To provide a collaboration model and encourage general education teachers, special education teachers, and other staff to work together to create appropriate and enriching learning experiences for ELs and ELs with LD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paneque &amp; Barbetta (2006)</td>
<td>To explore perceived teacher efficacy of special education teachers of English Language Learning students with disabilities and to find themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paneque &amp; Rodríguez (2009)</td>
<td>To investigate how 5 bilingual teachers use English and Spanish with their EL students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santamaria (2009)</td>
<td>To provide a case study of two schools that are reaching high levels of academic achievement and are closing achievement gaps in an effort to identify complementary teaching practices for all students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimmerman (2008)</td>
<td>To review literature on general education’s ability to address the needs of EL students and to provide suggestions to schools of education on how to better prepare teachers for working with EL students.</td>
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TEACHING STRATEGIES

❖ Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, and Lee (2014) stated that selecting the appropriate language of instruction is imperative in teaching English learners with disabilities.

❖ However, et al (2008) recommended that the following questions be asked to determine the most appropriate language of instruction:
   ➢ (1) What is the student’s native language;
   ➢ (2) What is the student’s English language proficiency level;
   ➢ (3) What is the student’s most proficient language – English or native language;
   (4) What native language instructional resources are available;
   ➢ (5) What English language development instructional resources are available;
   ➢ (6) Does the student’s IEP specify language of instruction; and
   ➢ (7) If not specified in the IEP, what is the district policy for selecting language of instruction? (p. 16)

❖ As stated by Cartledge and Kourea (2008, p. 353), “teachers who understand culturally different behaviors respond in ways that appropriately and proactively accept or redirect students’ behaviors when necessary.”
# Overrepresentation and Disproportionality

## Table 5. Articles Regarding Disproportionality and Overrepresentation of ELs in Special Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artiles, Rueda, Salazar &amp; Higareda (2005)</td>
<td>To explore the within-group diversity of ELs in special education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rueda &amp; Windmueller (2006)</td>
<td>To provide a multilevel approach on reviewing and evaluating the overrepresentation of ELs with learning disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan (2011)</td>
<td>A secondary analysis of existing data on 1.1 million students to investigate overrepresentation of EL students in Special Education.</td>
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</table>
Donovan and Cross (2002) found that race, ethnicity, gender, geographic region, variations across states in the eligibility criteria for disabilities, and different approaches for defining disproportion all influence under, proportionate, and over representation.

Artiles, Rueda, Salazar and Higareda (2005) explored the placement patterns of White English proficient learners and ELs and found that students whose native or primary language is not English are assessed for English proficiency.

English proficient refers to students who indicated that their native language is not English but they have met district criteria for proficiency and literacy in English, while ELs refers to those who do not meet the district criteria.

ELs were underrepresented at the elementary grade level but overrepresented at the secondary level (Artiles et al., 2005).
OVERREPRESENTATION AND DISPROPORTIONALITY

- Findings suggested that ELs with limited English (L2) were slightly overrepresented as Learning Disabled at the secondary level (Artiles et al., 2005). Conversely, English proficient students were found to be under-represented at both the elementary and secondary grade levels (Artiles et al., 2005).

- When compared to white students in special ed, ELs were more likely to spend at least part of their day in separate settings, such as resource rooms (Sullivan, 2011).

- EL students in English immersion programs were more likely to be classified as special education than ELs placed in other language support programs. This suggests the importance of native language support and instruction (Artiles et al., 2005).
Assessing Bilingual Learners with Disabilities

Baca and Cervantes (2004) pointed out

1. Student’s biography
2. Academic context
3. Interaction between the learner and the academic context
4. Students’ weaknesses and difficulties
5. Proposed alternative educational agenda/plan to ensure the success of the learner
6. Repertoire of teaching strategies for the student
### Behaviors Associated w/ LD

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Difficulty following directions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with phonological awareness</td>
<td>Difficulty distinguishing b/w sounds not in L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence</td>
<td>Confusion w/ sound-symbol correspondence when different than L1 Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words</td>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings not understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty retelling a story in sequence</td>
<td>May understand more than can convey in L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused by figurative language</td>
<td>Confused by figurative language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow to process challenging language</td>
<td>Slow process challenging language</td>
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<tr>
<td>May have poor auditory memory</td>
<td>May have poor auditory memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May have difficulty concentrating</td>
<td>May have difficulty concentrating</td>
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<tr>
<td>May seem easily frustrated</td>
<td>May seem easily frustrated</td>
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</table>
CONCLUSION

❖ As the number of ELs continues to increase in the public school system, educators must strive to be knowledgeable in the pre-referral process and non-biased in assessment in order to avoid over-identification and disproportionality in special education programs.

❖ In addition, experts in the field of special education should provide early intervention services to the general school faculty and staff. This will help prevent any potential problems related to misidentification and academic at risk students.

❖ We recommend use of the native language as a teaching resource.

❖ We recommend that bilingual special education teachers become knowledgeable about the latest research-based practices to teach ELs with disabilities effectively.
In Summary

All students have the right to an equal and appropriate education including students who have a disability and are learning a second language.
The influence of a good teacher can never be erased.

Q&A