

*Issues and Concerns of Assessment for English Language
Learners with Learning Disabilities*

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Abstract

Limited research has been accomplished within the past few years regarding issues and concerns of assessment for English Language Learners (ELL) with Learning Disabilities (LD). The increasing number of this unique population throughout schools has raised many concerns for professionals in education. English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities is a major topic that brings many issues and concerns of assessment for this particular population. How and by whom the students are being assessed is an immense concentration in the concerns of the topic. Assessment reliability and test fairness implies the issues educators have. Teacher readiness and student instructional history are two fundamental matters impacting special education outcomes of English Language Learners with LD.

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ELL is the acronym for English Language Learners. Throughout the years the population of ELL students has increased significantly throughout schools. Not only has the population of ELL students increased throughout the years, so has the number of ELL students in special education. Specifically, learning disabilities is the most recent addition to the categories of special education. Since the category's inclusion it has grown to include the largest groups of students receiving special services. In some states, more than half the students enrolled in special education are classified as learning disabilities.

LD is a disorder in one or more the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoke or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. There is a substantial knowledge base about the identification, assessment, and intervention of learning disabilities in native English-speaking students (Huang, 2011). Therefore, it is important to explore how we can build upon this knowledge to inform future work with ELL students. We must consider what methodologies can be used to determine the best ways of distinguishing between learning disabilities and language differences that appear as these students are learning English. Researchers must delineate the critical steps needed to accomplish these goals (Uribe & Nathenson-Mejía, 2009).

Identifying students who truly have both a learning disability along with limited English proficiency also has become difficult for educators to distinguish. If an ELL has a real learning disability, early identification and intervention are essential (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008). In most cases, the younger the student is when they receive remediation, the more effective it is in the long run. However, if an ELL truly has a learning difficulty and does

not receive services for a number of years because teachers are waiting for him or her to learn the language, serious consequences could result (Rinaldi & Samson, 2008).

Even though many ELLs have been misidentified, some ELLs struggle academically for reasons beyond second language status, sociocultural backgrounds, and educational history, even when compared to their ELL peers. It is this group of learners that is our focus here because interventions typically implemented in general, ESL, and special education instruction fail to adequately account for all their learning needs. According to IDEA (2004), a specific learning disability is:

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.

Assessment is a major component of the determinations of special services. The assessments used are directed for Native English speakers. Tests can be translated but it is too difficult to properly translate without changing sentences structure and proper use of terms. A related challenge when assessing ELLs concerns the language skills needed by the school psychologist studied the acceptability of various methods used to assess ELLs and found that using a bilingual school psychologist was the most acceptable practice (Huang, 2011). Using a bilingual school psychologist who is well trained to perform assessments with ELLs has long been considered to be best practice. Yet there is a severe shortage of bilingual school psychologists in the United States as they make up approximately 10.8% of all school psychologists. A further complication is the large number of second languages that ELLs speak and the need to match the second language between the practitioner and the student. Conventional wisdom also suggests that bilingual school psychologists need to be fluent in both languages, but there is debate about what constitutes “fluency.”

When an ELL is referred, finding a bilingual practitioner who is fluent and is matched to the second language of the student with the skills needed to establish the ELL’s language proficiency as well as conduct the remainder of the assessment can be difficult (Huang, 2012). The training received by bilingual school psychologists in the use of their second language in professional contexts is also an issue (Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Thurlow, 2000). Few school psychology programs offer training specifically aimed at preparing practitioners to deliver services to bilingual students. Only a handful of states have bilingual certification requirements that must be met to deliver services to ELLs. In addition, 80% or more of the school psychologists practicing in the eight states in the United States with the greatest concentration of Latino ELLs reported that their training in second language acquisition, methods to conduct bilingual assessments, and how to interpret their results was less than adequate.

Preparation for performing bilingual assessments can have many components, including relevant coursework, applied training, supervision by a bilingual supervisor and participation in relevant continuing education, and can occur during and/or after graduate

preparation (Herrell & Jordan, 2012). Although advancements in training have likely occurred since the study by Ochoa and colleagues was published, little is presently known about bilingual practitioners' preparation. Currently, best practices concentrate on learning the preservice and continuing education experiences of bilingual school psychologists concerning the assessment of ELLs to see if they predict use of best practice methods when assessing ELLs. Performing psychoeducational assessments is selecting measures appropriate for use with ELLs (Fernandez, Boccaccini, & Noland, 2007). It is often difficult to find instruments with norms representative of an ELL examinee. Certain assessment tools may be inappropriate if the student has not had adequate test-taking experience, which may be the case for those who have recently entered American schools. Using instruments not designed Psychology in the Schools for use with ELLs raises issues surrounding the construct equivalence, functional equivalence, and translation equivalence of the test (Huang, 2012).

Assessment of ELLs who may also have learning disabilities is the assessment validity and fairness. Each ELL has had a different set of experiences and ranges of educational exposure. Rinaldi and Samson (2008) discuss the implications of this diversity in instructional history as having a major impact on students' performance on assessments. For example, students may be able to speak fluently in their native language, but this does not mean that they are able to read and write. Some students may not have had any practice with reading and writing and this could negatively affect their assessment scores, even if the assessment is given in their native language (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010). Testing materials that are translated from English into a student's native language often are not equivalent. The student may not have the background knowledge necessary to answer the questions that an English speaking student would have. Therefore, the assessment results would not be valid and fair indicators of a learning disability but simply a lack of experience

Test items can easily be bias against ELLs leading to assessment fairness. ELLs with LD are at a disadvantage in taking assessments due to language deficiencies. Most cases translations into native language are necessary. It is very difficult to appropriately translate into native language without changing the test items. There is a lack of qualified and properly trained translators who can work with ELLs with LD resulting in decreased assessment validity, and assessment fairness.

Another challenge that school psychologists face when assessing ELLs concerns the use of interpreters. Given the wide array of second languages spoken, bilingual school psychologists may seek out interpreters when students speak a second language they do not speak. Although interpreters may be needed when language matches are not possible, their use raises several issues. First, interpreters may delete or add information that the examiner did not wish to convey. Second, interpreters may not be able to translate concepts that lack equivalence in the examinee's language. Third, the difficulty level of words may not translate to the same difficulty level in another language. Fourth, to maintain objectivity, the interpreter must not have a prior personal relationship with the examinee, which may prove difficult in communities where few people speak a language. Fifth, interpreters may not be adequately familiar with standardization procedures for

instruments and with the assessment process in general. In addition, it is ELL students undergo assessments. Reliability and measurement error are complementary ways of speaking about the same assessment phenomenon.

The concept of reliability focuses on the consistency of assessment results; the concept of measurement error focuses on their inconsistencies (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010). Assessments for students should be conducted in their native language should also be used in order to determine language proficiency. It is a major part involved in determining a student's eligibility for receiving special services. The majority of the assessments are based on standards of the English-speaking culture. As a result, there are very little chances that the scores obtained are appropriate, meaningful, or useless

Numerous concerns and issues focusing on assessment for English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities, questions ELLs who are referred to special education and their academic progress and outcomes. Research has been and continues to seek answers and solutions for concerns based on reliability of assessments and fairness. Teachers and educators are encouraged to seek professional development in order to be better prepared for this unique population of English Language Learners with learning disabilities.

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