

# Educating English-Language Learners with Special Needs: Beyond Cultural and Linguistic Considerations

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## Abstract

English-language learners (ELLs) with special needs consistently languish in the American school system. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) included ELLs as a minority group and required to hold schools accountable for reducing the achievement gap between ELLs and their white peers, however the act did not provide a specific direction for educators on how to help these students in the school context. A conceptual review was conducted to compile information on critical issues and challenges ELLs with special needs face as well as useful tips for assessment and instruction. Critical issues and challenges include assessment and identification, teacher preparation and professional development, and legal and policy issues. The useful tips discussed rely on the utilization of guidelines for assessment, Response to Intervention (RTI), and the support of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** English language learners with disabilities, assessment, identification, Response to Intervention, overrepresentation

English-language learners (ELLs) are a growing population in U.S. educational settings and the low academic achievement of many of these learners as well as how to improve educational outcomes for this population of students have been important topics in the field of education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Lesaux, 2006; Shore & Sabatini, 2009; Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) brought attention to this important issue by holding schools accountable for reducing the achievement gap between ELLs and their white peers. Since its passing, educators have been concerned about how to provide them with best practices; though, the act did not provide a specific direction for educators on how to help those students in the school context.

The educational needs of ELLs are multifarious and complicated (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). ELLs face many obstacles due to their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, ELLs with special needs have additional obstacles that impact their education besides cultural and linguistic differences. As such, salient critical issues, including identification and assessment, teacher preparation and professional development, and legal and policy issues, will be discussed. Then, useful instructional recommendations teachers of ELLs with special needs will also be presented, including assessment guidelines, Response to Intervention (RTI), and the role all stakeholders play.

## 1. Critical Issues and Challenges for ELLs with Special Needs

ELLs with special needs have multifaceted characteristics such as linguistic and cultural differences as well as disabilities. Hence, it is not easy for teachers to offer an adequate education for ELLs with disabilities. Therefore, it is helpful for teachers who have ELLs in their classrooms to know about what types of issues they should consider as to provide appropriate educational services. This section addresses critical issues related to the education of ELLs such as identification and assessment, individualization, teacher preparation and professional development, and legal and policy issues.

### 1.1. Identification and Assessment Issues

ELLs with disabilities can be misunderstood as struggling learners due to their cultural and linguistic differences as well as difficulties with second language acquisition because these differences and difficulties

commonly lead to underachievement in the classroom. Because of this underachievement, ELLs are often overrepresented in the learning disabilities (LD) category and teachers refer ELLs to special education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Further, these referrals usually lead to entry into special education. Highlighted here are issues with identification and assessment. These issues exist for a myriad of reasons.

First, it can be difficult to identify an ELLs due to variation in definitions. Some studies use the term “ELLs” when indicating students who are able to use two languages with an equal ability to fluently communicate and learn in both languages (Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005). Conversely, there are studies that use the term “bilingual” in order to describe students who speak English as second language and are not proficient in speaking and reading in English (Abedi, 2008). This ambiguity in definitions is no exception in NCLB. NCLB uses the term limited English proficiency (LEP) in order to indicate one minority subgroup and allows states flexibility in its definition, so understanding which students have additional needs and considerations when being identified and assessed can come with some difficulty.

Furthermore, while nationwide data show significant increase of minority students in special education, the number is likely to be an underestimate or overestimate due to the great variation in definitions and criteria used to identify students who are eligible for special education support (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Samson and Lesaux (2009) investigated proportional representation, identification rates, and predictors of ELLs in special education using a nationally representative sample of kindergarten, first grade, and third grade students. They found ELLs were underrepresented in special education in kindergarten and first grade but were overrepresented in third grade across all disability categories. This sharp increase in representation may point to the lack of valid, reliable measures available to properly identify ELLs with disabilities (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). So, it is unclear whether the overrepresentation is the result of actual disabilities or testing procedures that cannot distinguish whether or not a problem students have is derived from second language acquisition or disability (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002).

Lastly, assessment used in the field of special education and high-stakes testing may not benefit ELLs with special needs since this testing often includes unreliable and invalid measures of academic performance for students with special needs. Artiles and Ortiz (2002) suggested three basic reasons for this predicament. First, when accountability systems involve statewide or nationwide high-stakes testing, ELLs are usually excluded. ELLs’ test scores can be misinterpreted, which leads to special education referral. There is a negative presumption that test scores will be mismanaged so ELLs are referred to special education because a disability label makes it easier to justify their exclusion. If they are excluded, then data on their academic growth is not accurate. Secondly, the question of whether assessment should occur in a student’s native language or English still remains unanswered. Many test makers and administrators assume it is possible to appropriately test ELLs as long as the same test is available in the learner’s first and second language and norms exist for each version of the test (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2008). Contrary to that assumption, using assessments normed in either a student’s native language or in English may produce unexplained outcomes and diagnoses that cannot be defended (Figuroa, 2002 because “most tests reflect largely white, middle-class values and attitudes and they do not reflect the experiences and the linguistic, cognitive, and other cultural styles and values of minority group persons” (Laosa, 1977, p. 10). Even though translated tests have valid and reliable psychometric properties, they may still be biased due to “measures that are based upon the values, beliefs, and cultural heritage of the dominant American culture” (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2007, p. 68). Thirdly, there are validity concerns about testing students who do not speak English because all tests are typically biased against ELLs (Abedi, 2008). Abedi (2008) argued that predictive validity (how well a score on a scale or a certain construct predicts results obtained on some criterion measure or at some point in the future), construct validity (how well a test or a scale made from the operationalization in a study measures with the theorized psychological construct that it is supposed to measure), and reliability (how consistently a test or a scale measures the same qualities of test takers) diminish due to the disruptive impact of second language acquisition or bilingualism.

### *1.2. Teacher Preparation and Professional Development Issues*

In addition to identification and assessment issues, teacher preparation and professional development issues exist as teachers who work with ELLs with special needs must possess knowledge related to linguistic, cultural, and disability-related needs. Problems abound when teachers have difficulties providing appropriate services due to lack of knowledge for assessing and teaching ELLs with special needs in their classrooms (Hammer, Scarpino, & Davison, 2010). Nevertheless, educators have little a understanding about second language acquisition, the influence of

child's native language on his/her intellectual and cognitive development, the interactive relationship between native language and English language proficiency, and the impact of cultural differences on students' performance (Kushner & Ortiz, 2000).

Unfortunately, most general and special education teachers do not have extensive coursework or teacher preparation program related to educating students who have culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Ortiz & Yates, 2001). Because the lack of teacher education of instruction for this population of students, the lack of appropriate to endorse teacher certification in this area, and the severe shortage of teachers who have diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ELLs with and without disabilities are often taught by teachers with inadequate experience and qualifications (Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). Additionally, there is currently a shortage of fully certified teachers in general and special education (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Therefore, it should be noted that ELLs with and without disabilities cannot meet high academic standards unless they receive adequate instruction and high-quality services from their schools and teachers.

### *1.3. Legal and Policy Issues*

Various policies have been put in place to make sure that ELLs with and without disabilities receive appropriate educational services. For example, the provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) requires monitoring and enforcement to address both the overrepresentation of identification of minorities for special education as well as their placement in overly restrictive educational environments. It requires "the revision of policies, procedures, and practices used in such identification and placement" (IDEA, U.S.C. § 1418) to ensure compliance. In spite of these legislative improvements, research suggests that these provisions have not made much of an impact on educational outcomes (Mueller, Singer, & Grace, 2004). Unfortunately, these provisions are not familiar to educators, have not been effectively practiced, or have been being ignored (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Furthermore, although NCLB has offered options for inclusion of a student labeled LEP as a subgroup, it is not easy for a number of school districts to assess ELLs' academic abilities for AYP calculations since providing an culturally and linguistically nonbiased assessment for each ELL might not be possible.

In sum, there are critical issues, which contribute to inappropriate referrals of ELLs with special needs to special education and the confusion of assessing and teaching ELLs with special needs. There are multiple identification and assessment issues, a lack of teacher preparation and professional development in instruction for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and a shortage of certified special education teachers. Although policy has moved towards a provision of appropriate services for ELLs with special needs, the disproportionate representation of ELLs in special education reflects the lack of general understanding of the influence of linguistic and cultural differences on students' achievement.

## **2. Recommendations to Improve the Education of ELLs with Special Needs**

The growing population of school-aged ELLs in special education along with the likelihood of having low academic achievement of this population raises many questions about timely and accurate identification, assessment, and instruction for ELLs with special needs (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Thus, the fundamental questions become (1) How can acceptable curriculum be determined? (2) For ELLs who have special needs, what is an enriched educational context? For these questions, multiple factors will be discussed: assessment guidelines, RTI, and the role all stakeholders play. In short, acceptable curriculum can be determined with the use of appropriate and bias-free assessment as well as RTI. Moreover, an enriched educational context is comprised of the aforementioned elements as well as the collaboration of all stakeholders.

### *2.1. Assessing ELLs with Special Needs*

Assessing ELLs with special needs should be done without bias (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2008). Educators can administer bias-free assessments even with traditional assessments in special education, including intellectual performance assessments, functional behavioral assessments, and assessments to identify learning disabilities (McLoughlin & Lewis, 2008). Meaningful information about ELLs with special needs can be obtained by various sampling methods such as classroom observation, interviews with students and their parents, and task portfolios can

provide valuable information for use in assessment (Ysseldyke & Algozine, 2006). The following examples can provide teachers with tips for assessing ELLs with special needs.

- Teachers need to be aware of cultural and linguistic differences and their influence on the assessment process. Assessment procedures such as giving instructions, presenting tasks, or responding should not be biased due to teachers' limited knowledge about students' language and culture.
- Assessment items and assessment directions should be translated into the student's native language in order to make sure that ELLs fully understand the directions and contents of the assessment. Deletion or modification of culturally and linguistically inappropriate items might be necessary.
- Sometimes, however, translation is not enough because questions can reflect linguistic differences such as alphabetic and orthographic differences as well as cultural differences. Tests consisting of culture-free and culture-fair items can be considered in the initial step for developing measures. For example, teachers can choose pictures to represent words in order to assess ELLs' vocabulary and cognitive process.
- Teachers should not interpret the assessment results of ELLs based on norms constructed by using dominant culture students.
- Teachers can use simple, easy screening tools such as CORE Phonics Survey (Consortium on Reading Excellence, 2000) in order to identify the potential issues their ELLs may have when being taught reading to learn in English.
- In order for all ELLs to have access to appropriate assessment, IEP teams need to consider what kinds of accommodations should be provided to each ELL student. Additionally, IEP teams need to involve ELLs' parents and family so appropriate accommodations for assessment procedures can be provided.

### *2.2. Utilizing RTI to benefit ELLs with Special Needs*

ELLs vary widely in their language and background experiences within the ELL subgroup (Altiles & Ortiz, 2002). This variation poses complex challenges relating to the provision of educational programs and services consistent with each student's individualized needs. RTI is an alternative to traditional procedures of identification, assessment, and instruction. It is a three tier prevention system that includes three fundamental concepts: (a) systematic, research-based interventions; (b) measurement of student response to implemented interventions including level and pace; and (c) data based instructional decisions (Mellard, 2004; Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). It also holds schools accountable for careful progress monitoring of all students in order to meet state grade level standards and integrate assessment and intervention (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Each ascending tier calls for more individualized and intensive instruction.

RTI has a myriad of benefits. One of the benefits of utilizing the RTI approach in ELL education is that it can reduce a "wait to fail" situation because students receive prompt intervention within the general education setting (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005). Through progress monitoring in each tier, the RTI approach can help distinguish between students whose low achievements are due to a disability, cultural or linguistic issues, or inadequate interventions (Batsche et. al., 2005; Fletcher et al., 2005). Thus, the RTI approach has the potential to eliminate disproportionality of ELLs in special education by increasing the opportunity to learn as well as the number of students who are successful within general education settings. RTI also complies with the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and No Children Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). Furthermore, the classroom has been shown to be the best place to determine why an ELL is not progressing, to distinguish between learning problems due to the existence of disabilities or other aforementioned reasons (Figueroa, 2002).

- As long as the ambiguity of identifying ELLs' reading problems and low achievement issues due to LEP exist, teachers should consider whether intensive curriculum and supplementary support has been provided without bias under multi-tiered framework before referring them to special education.
- When developing appropriate instruction, educators should consider classroom performance. Educators need to rely more on observing ELLs in classroom than on testing them. Figueroa (2002) argued that instruction for ELLs who are struggling with learning in English should be developed on the basis of how they perform in class rather than on test scores from tests that may not even be able to assess their

capabilities.

- At tier I, teachers need to capture ELLs' language proficiency in their native language as well as in English (Brown & Doolittle, 2008) in order to provide appropriate instruction. That is, teachers should control the level of teaching dialogue as well as teaching materials so as to make sure that ELLs are able to fully understand the context of teaching and learning in the general education curriculum before placement in tier II. In comparison to their "true peers (similar language proficiencies, culture and experiential background)" (Brown & Doolittle, 2008, p. 68), if students are still struggling, it appears that they are in need of more supplementary, intensive instruction.
- At tier II and tier III, within a small group instruction, instructional accommodations and modifications need to be individualized for ELLs based on their special needs. For example, ELLs' low achievements might be due to limited cognitive skills or linguistic deficits.

### *2.3. Collaborating with All Stakeholders and Families of ELLs*

Communication and collaboration between all stakeholders and among school administrators, teachers, and parents improves educational outcomes for ELLs with special needs (Keller-Allen, 2006). Educators should venture to work with all stakeholders: policy makers, law agencies, researchers, and families of ELLs. Each can impact the education and outcomes of ELLs in a separate, yet equally important way while working with each other to ensure systematic and sustained special education services. Furthermore, it is important that teachers build a collaborative relationship with stakeholders and share ELLs' achievement data and learning experiences with the goal of improving educational outcomes. Additionally, regular meetings with ELLs' parents can encourage a collaborative relationship as well as provide useful information to help you make instructional decision-making.

- IEP team members should become familiar with how best to educate students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as well as how to include them in the general education curriculum.
- The special education teacher would work as a collaborator with colleagues in general education classes in order to improve the educational achievement of ELLs.
- Teachers should work with families of ELLs with special needs to work towards an understanding of their background to bridge experiences from home to school. Also, families should be involved in the planning and evaluation of special education services to ensure they are appropriate.
- All stakeholders should work to gather data on ELLs' to support appropriate identification, assessment, and placement so it can be publicized to affect positive changes for ELLs with and without disabilities.

### **3. Discussion**

Critical issues and challenges as well as recommendations to improve the education of ELLs with special needs have been discussed, including assessment and identification, teacher preparation and professional development, and legal and policy issues. Recommendations for teachers about assessment, RTI, and collaborating with all stakeholders were also discussed. Following the recommendations will likely lead to an acceptable curriculum and enriched educational context for ELLs with special needs.

Identification and assessment procedures must not be biased and discriminatory. Given that there are growing concerns about inappropriate referrals of ELLs to special education as well as a disproportionate representation of ELLs within special education, it should be noted that teaches of ELLs with disabilities urgently need guidance on how to best identify, assess, and support the learning needs of ELLs with special needs. Moreover, educators should be careful in identifying whether students' academic problems derive from second language acquisition or cognitive skills required to perform successfully.

Also, special education assessment personnel need to explore new avenues for working with children with unique cultural and linguistic characteristics, considering limited English proficiency and observing students in enriched and effective instructional contexts to understand from where their problems originated. To improve programs and services for ELLs with special needs, general and special educators, policy makers, and researchers also need to overcome barriers embedded in general and special education settings to help ELLs with special needs

gain access to general education. In addition, it is important that all educators and parents of ELL students, who are involved in educating ELLs with special needs, work collaboratively in order to help ELLs get better outcomes in schools. The challenges of educating ELLs with special needs can be overcome by providing culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments and interventions compatible with students' individual needs. By building on the existing cultural and linguistic knowledge of their ELL students with special needs, educators can work towards access to and success in general education settings.

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