

7-1-2013

# Addressing the Gap between Research and Practice in Assessment of At Risk ELLS

Claudette Larned

*University of Mary Washington*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.umw.edu/education\\_589](https://scholar.umw.edu/education_589)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Larned, Claudette, "Addressing the Gap between Research and Practice in Assessment of At Risk ELLS" (2013). *Education 589 Projects*. 16.

[https://scholar.umw.edu/education\\_589/16](https://scholar.umw.edu/education_589/16)

This Education 589 Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education 589 Projects by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact [archives@umw.edu](mailto:archives@umw.edu).

Addressing the Gap between Research and Practice in Assessment of At Risk ELLS

Claudette Larned

EDCI 589 Applied Research

University of Mary Washington

Summer 2013

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received  
unauthorized help on this work. – Claudette Larned

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	1
Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Specific Learning Disability/Learning Disability	5
Risk Factors for At Risk ELL	8
Assessment Issues Specific for ELLs	11
Teacher Leadership	14
Conclusion	18
Application Description	19
References	21
Appendix	27

## **Introduction**

**Background.** The national demographics in the United States are changing to include a growing number of students in K-12 who do not speak or are not proficient in English. It is estimated that 10 % of children today are not proficient in English (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Although a large majority of English language learners (ELLs) are located in a few states (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), most states have seen significant spikes in enrollment of students who speak languages other than English at home. More than half of all states reported at least 5% of their population was ELLs (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While most ELLs in the United States are Spanish speakers (around 70- 80%), other common languages are Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian and Hmong. In any given school district, there may literally be hundreds of languages and dialects spoken by students (Barrera & Liu, 2010). Many of these students are poor and are being enrolled in public school in rural schools (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003).

**Rationale.** At the same time as states and schools are experiencing this increased growth, national regulations are demanding that schools track the progress of ELLs and insure they make adequate yearly progress in both academic subjects and in English. This increase in regulation is due in part to the poor educational outcomes experienced by a significant portion of ELLs and the disproportional representation of ELLs in special education. While some would consider the provision of special education services as a benefit to struggling students, the research does not support these conclusions. In fact, identification was linked with academic failure for a large portion of students with

specific learning disabilities. Limited proficiency in English language was a significant statistical indicator in identification of students with learning disabilities. Further, state accountability assessment data show that ELLs with disabilities among the lowest achieving students (Liu, Barrera, Turlow, Guven, & Shyyan , 2005, as cited in Barrera & Liu, 2010)

Both the No Child Left Behind Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) include provisions that require that English Language Learners (ELLs) be given the appropriate placement and instruction needed to succeed in the American education system. There is a general agreement, however, that current educational research is insufficient, creating inadequate means to determine the differences between at risk ELL students who are having difficulty due to the acquisition of a second language, and those that have a learning disability in addition to learning English as a second language. This discrepancy creates false positives and false negatives that result in improper placement of ELL students in general education and special education (Schoorman, Zainuddin, & Sena, 2011; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Barrera, 2006).

**Problem.** General education teachers and special education teachers are faced with the substantial burden of determining and meeting the educational needs of at risk English Language learners without a clear understanding of what those needs may be. Since the current burden falls mainly on teachers in both assessment and instruction, teachers must increase their understanding of the issues as they relate to assessment of ELLs and improve their ability to address the needs of “at risk” ELLs, or these students will continue to fail to make academic progress.

**Research questions.**

1. How are the “at risk” for learning disabilities among ELLs determined?
2. What are the challenges in assessment of ELLs who may be at risk for a learning disability?
3. Given the lack of research, how can teachers, with limited recourses, improve the assessment process?

Because the majority of ELLs (80%) fall under the area of having a need in reading (International Dyslexia Association, 2007, as cited in Tong, Huang & McIntyre, 2006), this paper will focus on evaluation of those factors related to these topics, and general issues related to assessment, but will not specifically address research related to math.

### **Specific Learning Disability (SLD) or Learning Disability (LD)**

**Defining learning disabilities.** In examining the questions of what makes ELLs at greater risk for being identified as having a learning disability, consideration must be given to the way in which learning disabilities are defined and identified. Current law, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) states:

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. Such term **includes such conditions** as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term **does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of** visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (NICHCY, 2012, p.4)

Although the definition includes the idea of a disorder of psychological processes, subsequent research shows that:

Although processing difficulties have been linked to some SLD (e.g., phonological processing and reading), direct links with other processes have not been established. Currently available methods for measuring many processing difficulties are inadequate. Therefore, systematically measuring processing difficulties and their link to treatment is not yet feasible (Reschly & Schmeid, 2003, p. 5).

Given the discrepancy in the definition, and current research, it is no wonder that concerns are raised regarding the disproportionate representation of minorities in this category of disability. It should be noted that poverty could be, in part, responsible for some of the increase in representation of minorities in disability categories. Clear links have been established between brain development and early nutrition and experiences. This is a factor since more than two thirds of ELLs come from low-income families (Sheng, Sheng & Anderson, 2011). While the direct affect of poverty cannot be determined, ample evidence also exists of improper identification of students with learning disabilities in this population. Despite the regulations that prohibit identification based on environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage, research by the National Research Council (2002), and Heller, Holts & Messick, 1982, identified persistent misidentification, placement, and overrepresentation of minority students in special education. (as cited in Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003)

**Assessing learning disabilities.** A variety of practices are in effect for assessing learning disabilities that affect who is found eligible under the category of specific learning disability (SLD), or learning disability (LD), the term used in this paper.

Generally, a learning disability is identified through an exclusionary manner. When other factors are ruled out, the finding is a learning disability. Early definitions of learning disabilities involved discrepancy models, where a student's achievement was significantly below IQ. Differentiating factors included comparison of full scale IQ to achievement, limited placement of full scale IQ score of at least 85 with IQ achievement discrepancy, and a discrepancy of 1 ½ standard deviations to name a few. These models of identification were compared by Coffey and Obringer, (2011). They found that only the process that included the minimum IQ score of 85 produced proportional representation. However, this model failed to address students with lower than 85 IQ's that had moderate discrepancies of achievement. This study further acknowledged, "without rigor in the assessment guidelines, the eligibility criteria of learning disabilities can be manipulated to serve any at-risk student" (Coffey & Obringer, 2011, para. 11). The discrepancy model has fallen out of favor with researchers and academics due to its inability to differentiate between simple lack of achievement, poor instruction and learning disabilities. Despite this, it continues to be used in many states (Reschly, Hosp, & Schmied, 2003, p.5).

An alternative method of assessment for learning disabilities supported in IDEA is a process called Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI presumes that students with learning disabilities will fail to respond to quality, research based, methods of instruction. This has resulted in multiple means of determining what constitutes a non-response. In general students under go a universal screening process. Students who fall below a cut off point are then identified as "at risk" and given additional instruction. Those students who fail to progress as determined by subjective measures are given increasing levels of small



group and individualized support. Students who fail to respond to the research based methods and high quality instruction are presumed to have a learning disability.

Many models for determining non-responsiveness exist in the literature. In the Median Split Method, the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test is used. The median slope of progress over several years is documented. Students who fall below the median slope are considered non responsive (O'Connor & Klingner, 2010). In the Normalization process, again the Woodcock reading Mastery test is used. Students who fall below a score of 90 after tutoring are considered non responsive (O'Connor & Klingner, 2010). The Dual Discrepancy model utilizes a curriculum-based measurement of reading fluency. It considers the slope of improvement during treatment and the performance level at the end. Non-responders are considered to be those whose slope and final level are one standard deviation below classroom peers (O'Connor & Klingner, 2010). These varying methods for assessing the response to intervention, call in to question whether a nonresponse is a level of achievement as determined by a specific cut score or is a rate of progress or somewhere in between. Unfortunately, in several case studies, when students are compared using each of these methods, there were inconsistencies in which students were identified with a learning disability (Barte et al., as cited in O'Connor & Klingner, 2010). A separate study by O'Conner, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005) used cut point, slope and normative test score as screeners (as cited in O'Conner & Klingner, 2010). They found that they could identify all students who end up in special education (they were identified as part of an "at risk" group), but they could not identify which "at risk" students would not respond to interventions (as cited in O'Conner & Klingner, 2010).

### **Risk Factors For At Risk ELL Students**

**Confusion between LD and English language acquisition.** Students who are learning English as a second language often fall into the “at risk” category of students. Difficulty with understanding and communicating in their second language makes accessing the curriculum difficult both in the process of understanding material and communicating their ideas effectively. The process of acquiring a second language in this respect mimics many of the identifiers of LD in that ELLs demonstrate delays in reading, writing, and oral language. ELLs may not have the discourse and pragmatic skills needed, making LD identification more likely (Brice, Miller & Brice, 2007). Language development research indicates that it takes 1-2 years to develop social conversation, and 5-7 years to develop academic language. This time frame for language presumes literacy in the first language. Many ELLs are American born, and are entering school for the first time. They are not literate in their 1<sup>st</sup> language, and as a result, this time frame for 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition may be inappropriate. Further, Tong et al. report the results of numerous studies that demonstrate that students may be exited from English language programs after achieving social language, but before they have achieved proficiency in academic language found in secondary texts and classroom material (Tong, Huang & McIntyre, 2006). This is of concern because students who demonstrate a limited language proficiency in both languages have higher rates of identification. Shifrer, Muller & Callahan, (2011) found that students who were socially proficient versus academically proficient were more likely to be identified as learning disabled. For students who have exited English as a second language programs, teachers may assume that English proficiency is no longer a problem (Tyler, 2006, as cited in Garcia, & Tyler, 2010) and associate educational difficulties with learning disabilities. The difficulties in properly

identifying students with learning disabilities is difficult when assessing monolingual students, let alone applying these concepts and practices to students who have the combined issue of learning a 2<sup>nd</sup> language. Minorities tended to be underrepresented in K-1 while over represented in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This may reflect a wait and see approach and reluctance by some educators to identify students who are learning a second language. The use and underuse of English language as a factor present problems. On one hand, students are misidentified due to language-based difficulties. Students who are misidentified often have restricted access to content and social experiences, hampering their academic progress. However, on the other hand, students who receive a delayed identification due to the “wait and see” approach do not receive the academic support they need to succeed.

**Dual language deficiencies.** In order to address language as a factor, some research stresses the importance of evaluating students in both languages to determine if a language deficit is occurring in both languages. The idea is that students with learning disabilities will express delays in both languages. The study by Valadez, MacSwan and Martinez (2000) calls in to question the validity of these factors. Researchers examined the language of two groups of students. The first group was considered normal and high achievers. The second group consisted of “Non/non’s”, a group of students who were identified as being deficient in both languages. While the study looked at only a small group, it found that the low achieving “semilinguales” had no significant differences from high achievers in linguistic abilities (Valadez et al., 2000). This calls in to question, the ability of psychologists and teachers to assess student’s grasp of language and the validity of the LD designation. In a subsequent study, Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung and

Roach-Scott (2009) found that school professionals lacked understanding of testing/screening tools. A DIAL-3 developmental screening was reported as a language screening and diagnostic assessment (Hardin et al., 2009). Further, according to the 1999 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, teachers reported that “addressing the needs of limited English proficient or culturally diverse students” was one of the top three areas in which they felt underprepared (Vasquez, Lopez, Straub, Powell, McKinney, Walker, Bedesem, 2011, p.1). Finally, Solano-Flores (2008), in her research found that ELL English proficiency tests may be based on age or grade level and not on second language development (as cited in Hardin & Hung, 2009). This further confuses the issue of language, making it difficult for educators to determine the student’s language proficiency and needs.

**Access to quality teaching.** While English language proficiency may be a significant predictor of identification of LD, the experience of the teacher is also a predictor of students who fail to respond to intervention. Linan-Thomson, Vaghn, Prate and Cirino (2006) concluded that classroom instruction is insufficient for many ELL students however, “the majority of students responded well to high quality interventions” (p.301), and suggested that the rest are likely LD (O’Connor & Klingner, 2010). However, multiple studies have documented that students who fail to respond to intervention have teachers that are less skilled and less effective, or less compliant with intervention protocols. The teachers are unable or unwilling to provide the supports needed. Many ELLs attend schools in low-income areas with limited resources and have high turnover and low recruitment of skilled teachers (Harry & Klingner, 2007, as cited in O’Conner & Klingner, 2010). Educators must begin to seriously examine the external

factors for academic success, before concluding that the critical factor is related to a deficiency in the child.

### **Assessment Issues Specific to ELL**

**Questions of validity.** It is clear that current disability assessment procedures may not offer a clear picture of the learning abilities of students who are acquiring a second language. Authors Huang, Clark, Milezarski, and Raby (2011) go further and raise concerns for a broad array of educational assessments tools and materials. There is an identified lack of accuracy, validity and fairness of assessing ELLs using standardized assessments that are not normed for the ELLs. In addition, questions built into testing create bias and lack fairness when they test background knowledge that may not be known to the ELL, test English language knowledge, or include auxiliary skills that are not intended to be tested, but by nature of the testing process, become part of the assessment. Barrera and Liu (2010) point out that equally objectionable is the use of curriculum-based measurements (CBMs) or general outcome measures (GOM) as predictive tools or as identifiers for determining the need for special education services for ELLs. They argue that GOMs have moved from being formative tests used to measure effectiveness of instruction, to predictive measures for other standardized tests, or evidence of student failure to progress. While GOMs provide a snapshot of what a child knows, or of what they can do, they do not provide information as to why the results are the way they are. Authors Barrera & Liu (2010) also point out that these tests are not normed for ELLs, so no conclusions can be drawn as to the appropriateness of the rate of progress or skill level. GOPs used in RTI models, do not address background knowledge, cultural differences, or lack of experience in education, to name a few, as

contributors to the child's assessment results. Finally, the RTI assessment practice presumes that the research based instruction, which it is assessing, is appropriate and effective in meeting the needs of the English language learner (Barrera & Liu, 2010). The unique needs of second language learners as compared to research groups call in to question whether these groups are adequately represented by the research. The works of Barrera and Liu (2010) and Huang et al. (2011) raise concerns that the current assessment and instruction practices are leading to ELL students being incorrectly evaluated and placed (or not placed) in special education.

**Heterogeneity of population.** It is clear that there is a gap in research available that addresses the assessment and instruction needs of ELLs. (Barrera & Liu, 2010; Huang et al., 2011) Furthermore, research-based instruction, even when it includes ELLs in the research, must be cautiously considered. A comparable "peer" for a ELL learner would be represented by someone with similar language abilities in both languages, similar cultures, educational exposure, and background experiences, to name a few (Barrera & Liu, 2010). Matching this wide range of variables is very challenging. For many studies, this detailed information is not available. When using comparisons within the classroom, educators also might consider comparing students within a class that speak the same language and are of similar age to determine a reasonable growth or rate of progress. Even within same school classrooms, with students who speak the same language, it could be a mistake to consider the students "peers" for the purpose of comparing development, without taking all the factors unique to the student, into consideration. As a result, Barrera and Liu (2010) and Huang et al. (2011) each point out the need for additional training for teachers who work with this population, especially

targeting instruction and assessment of at risk or learning disabled ELLs. Further, Bateman and Haring (1977) contend that students do not have learning disabilities, but “instructional disabilities” or “academic learning experiences detrimental to their development” (Fletcher, & Navarrete, 2003, p32). These problems are best summarized by Coffey and Obringer (2011) who state that “without rigor in the assessment guidelines, the eligibility criteria of learning disabilities can be manipulated to serve any at-risk student” ( p. 3).

**Area of promise in assessment.** While relatively still new, curriculum based dynamic assessments (DA) offers a promising alternative to traditional assessments in identifying ELLs with learning disabilities (Barrera & Liu, 2010; Huang et al., 2011, Jitenrda, Rohena-Diaz, & Nolet, 1998). As described by Jitenrda et al. (1998), dynamic assessment uses a “test-teach-test” (p.1) approach to assessment. The authors outline six steps to the assessment. Using three different but related assessments, the student is tested on a task in both languages. The teacher notes difficulties the student has with the task. A second task similar to the first is introduced, and the student is tested again, this time with the teacher providing instruction and assistance at difficulty. Difficulties and responses to instruction are evaluated, and what works and what does not is noted. Finally, a post-test task is introduced, and pre/post test results are compared. Lessons are then designed around the child’s identified needs and learning needs. DA provides insights into how the student learns, based on what he is taught, not based on what he knows. While Jitendra et al. (1998) use the information to direct instruction, Liu and Barrera (2013) argue that as long as the content taught is similarly new to all students, comparisons can be made for students who may have differing levels of ability at the

onset. It also offers opportunities to make comparisons between students with similar language needs or between similar learners, to compare rates of progress and achievement among students. These comparisons may offer clearer insight into whether the lack of progress made by a ELL is the result of learning a second language, or is the result of a learning disability that is comorbid with the student's second language acquisition.

**Consequences for ELLs** While DA offers promising insights, assessment and instruction of students learning English as their second language, remains problematic. Students who have learning disabilities, but do not get identified, do not receive the support they need. However, research shows that ELLs who are incorrectly identified as learning disabled, rather than benefiting from the individualized instruction offered in special education class, often lose ground (Barrera & Liu, 2010). Placement in special education may result in limited interactions, limited exposure to curriculum content and lowered expectations. As a result, the proper instruction and assessment of needs for ELLs is vital.

### **Teacher Leadership**

**Defining the role of the teacher.** While current research suggests that additional research is needed in addressing the assessment of at risk ELL students and ELL students with disabilities this research is not yet available, and therefore, not available for use by practitioners currently working to identify students who are "at risk" or who have learning disabilities. Current statistics indicate that most teachers have at least one ELL in their classroom (Sheng, Sheng & Anderson, 2011). These teachers may not have access



to extensive training, may not speak the student's language or have assistants fluent in the language.

The exclusionary nature of learning disabilities remains and students must be examined in their "sociocultural context to determine which of these variables may have an impact on their current academic performance." (Bos & Flecher, 1997, as cited by Fletcher and Navarrete, 2003, p 33). In a study by Harris, Gray, Davis, and Zaremba (1997), 37% of people routinely ignored or attempted to circumvent the exclusionary clause. (Harris, Gray, Davis and Zaremba, 1997, as cited by Fletcher and Navarrete, 2003). Further, Ladson and Hammon, (2001) found that racial composition of the district was a predictor of special education, with lower referrals in districts with high minority students, and lower referrals in districts with higher levels of minority staff (Fletcher and Navarrete, 2003). This seems to suggest both socio-cultural biases and discrimination exist in the assessment process. In considering LD there is a tendency to look for a within child deficit, rather than at the external factors and contextual contributors that can be changed or modified. (Fletcher and Navarrete) In order to affect change, educator bias toward minority groups must change (Heward & Cavanaugh, 2001; Paton, 1998, as cited in Schoorman, et al., 2011). Teachers must become skilled in the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive characteristics of student from diverse backgrounds. Teachers must rethink their roles, to include developing their leadership and advocacy skills to avoid marginalization, and to act as informers of parent to support decision-making and to avoid being compliant in poor and misinformed practices. (Schoorman et al., 2011 )

**Teacher and parent relationships.** While quality of instruction is important, so is the relationship between teachers and parents. A significant factor affecting success

rates for ELLs was parent involvement. Parent involvement correlates with increased attendance, increased achievement, increased graduation rates and more positive experience. Barriers to parent involvement continue despite consistent research studies finding that point to “family participation as a key, yet vulnerable part of this process.” (Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung & Roach-Scott, 2009, p. 100). Lasky, Belinda, and Korge identify five factors that affect parental involvement. Frequent family-teacher networking was one area that improved parental participation. Their research suggests that educators and families must spend time together. Other areas identified were two-way communications, establishment of written policies, administrative support and parent training.

While teachers may not have complete control over all these factors, they can determine what written policies exist at their school, and help disseminate information to parents; they can be effective communicators through out the assessment or educational process and solicit feed back from parents regarding the student. Teachers can also help to solicit administrative support of parent involvement all in advance of any academic challenges. Should the student become part of the “at risk” population, teachers must help inform parents of the educational process. “Parents may lack understanding of education system, their rights and have may have difficulty in participation in IEP group discussions” (Liu and Barrera, 2013, p. 38). Teachers can facilitate parental understanding through pre and post assessment interactions.

**Multicultural classrooms.** While teachers work to affect encourage parental involvement and understanding of the school system, so teachers must use equal vigor in working to understand the student’s culture. Students may display behaviors different

from the mainstream that are appropriate to their culture, but may be mistaken by others. Teachers must learn about their student's cultures. Tong, Huang, and McIntyre, (2006) recommend finding "cultural informants," other members in the community from the culture who are familiar with the group and can explain their ways. These differences might include child-adult interaction behavioral differences and other "'right ways' in their cultural group [that] might conflict with American institutions" (Tong et al., 2006, p. 204). Differences in interaction styles can influence teachers' perceptions of students and can negatively impact the student's ability to participate in the classroom (Sheng, Sheng & Anderson, 2011). By seeking understanding of the student's culture, including its customs and history, teachers can more easily facilitate culturally relevant material into the curriculum. Sensitivity to language and culture, and sharing about language, culture, country and experiences provide students with opportunities for discussion. Incorporating the student's cultural knowledge and community experiences is a significant tool for classroom instruction and facilitates academic and social skill acquisition (Ruffin, 2009; Sheng et al., 2011). Improved understanding of culture and how it impacts the student can help teachers to better understand student progress, which impacts student assessment.

**Curriculum Access.** A full examination of English as a second language instructional techniques is outside the scope of this paper however there are general practices that should be in place prior and during intervention that will help to frame assessment and to improve outcomes for at risk students. Some research indicates that the "lack of access to grade level content" may be a problem related to test performance. (Albus & Thrulow, 2007, as cited in Liu and Barrera, 2013, p. 33). In a separate study,

Zehler et al., 2003 found that “instructional services for Ell’s with disabilities were less closely aligned to state standard than services for fluent English-speaking students with disabilities or Ell’s without disabilities” (Liu and Barrera, 2013, p. 33). Collaboration among ESL, Special Education and General Education teachers should focus on skills students need including “(a) identifying specific content and/or skills that can be reinforced by ...[these] teachers; (b) ensuring that instruction in these concepts/skills will be consistent across teachers and programs; and (c) preventing gaps, redundancies, and/or conflicts (Garcia & Tyler, 2010, p. 118). Additionally, language instruction must be a part of the content curriculum, as students need to have access to understandable content. While “younger students require social language development, older students need to learn academic language at the same time as learning English” (Liu and Barrera, 2013, p. 32).

**General instructional techniques.** While ELLs have different language needs than students with learning disabilities only, there are overlapping strategies that have been shown to be effective for both categories of students and their typically progressing peers. The use of peers and interactions with others facilitate learning, as does feedback and encouragement, verbalization of thought, use of organizers, and connecting students learning to past experiences and background knowledge. Reinforcement of verbal with written to simplify language, but not content, use various modalities including visual, auditory, tactile, to support learning and development authentic learning experiences lend themselves to increased academic success for all students (Ruffin, 2009). High quality instruction that is sensitive to students individual needs can reduce “at risk” standing, and

can prepare the teacher to better document and support student's academic development or lack thereof.

**Improving technical knowledge.** Finally, general education teachers, English as a Second Language professionals, special educators and parents may lack communication skills or may be unfamiliar with terminology associated with individual disciplines and the assessment process. This inhibits the communication of the multidisciplinary IEP team. Participants should familiarize themselves with the terminology and assessments involved in each discipline and facilitate its understanding by parents or others who may have input in the assessment process.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to identify for the classroom teacher some of the relevant knowledge and understandings need to increase the teacher's ability to assist in the proper identification and assessment English language learners who may be at risk for a learning disability. While current debate and research precludes absolute answers as to who has a learning disability and at times offers confusing and contradictory results, teachers are uniquely challenged to identify these children in the practicum of their trade. This author asserts that teachers can improve the process of assessment and instruction, by taking active measures to consider non child centric process that might be contributing to who is "at risk." While no single assessment method, instructional tool, or professional development course offers immediate relief to the assessment dilemma, educators who inform themselves of the challenges and potential solutions, can better evaluate the assessment and instruction methods they use in their own class, and offer improved insights when acting as part of the RTI or special education evaluation process. Small

steps can help insure that students with and without learning disabilities, who are learning English as second language, receive a high quality and appropriate education.

### **Application**

As a result of the research, it is apparent that many teachers need support in assessing students who are at risk or who are dually identified as learning disabled and English language learners. Presented as an appendix to this literature review, is manual containing information and suggestions on assessment practices, with the intention of facilitating collaboration and communication between the general classroom teachers and special education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instructors. The sections identify the methods used in identifying learning disabilities in the individual school, addresses issues that should be considered with the assessment tools used in the process at that school, and define the area specific jargon used in differing specialties, in order to help improve collaboration among peers, and offer general teaching tools that can help begin to improve instruction. A section also includes ideas for parent/teacher interaction opportunities. An example of a monitoring tool that may be useful in tracking student specific information is also provided. The intention of this researcher is not to provide an all-inclusive manual, but rather to provide a beginning place for teachers to examine issues in assessment, to develop a better understanding of the tools used in their school and to provide a format that encourages teachers to develop a global picture of the student.

### References

- Acswan, J., & Rolstad, K. (2006). How language proficiency tests mislead us about ability: Implications for English language learner placement in special education. *Teachers College Record*, 108(11), 2304-2328. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9620.2006.00783.x
- Barrera, M., & Liu, K. (2010). Challenges of general outcomes measurement in the RTI progress monitoring of linguistically diverse exceptional learners. *Theory Into Practice*, 49(4), 273-280. doi:10.1080/00405841.2010.510713
- Barrera, M. (2006). Roles of definitional and assessment models in the identification of new or second language learners of English for special education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(2), 142-156.
- Batt, E. G. (2008). Teachers' perceptions of ELL education: Potential solutions to overcome the greatest challenges. *Multicultural Education*, 15(3), 39-43.
- Brice, A., Miller, K., & Brice, R. G. (2007). A study of English as a second language in general education classrooms. *Multiple Voices For Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 10(1/2), 82-93.
- Chu, S., & Flores, S. (2011). Assessment of English language learners with learning disabilities. *Clearing House*, 84(6), 244-248. doi:10.1080/00098655.2011.590550
- Coffey, K. M., & Obringer, S. (2011). Rural minority students: A challenge for assessment personnel. *National Forum Of Multicultural Issues Journal*, 9(1), 1-6.

- Fletcher, T., Navarrete, L. (2003). Learning disabilities or differences: A critical look at issues associated with the misidentification and placement of Hispanic students in special education programs. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 22 (4), 30-38.
- Garcia S., Tyler, B. (2010). Meeting the needs of English language learners with learning disabilities in the general curriculum. *Theory Into Practice*, 49, 113-120. Doi: 10.1080/00405841003626585
- Gyovai, L., Cartledge, G., Kourea, L., Yurick, A., & Gibson, L. (2009). Early reading intervention: Responding to the learning needs of young at-risk English language learners. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 32(3), 143-162.
- Hardin, B., Mereoiu, M., Hung, H., & Roach-Scott, M. (2009). Investigating parent and professional perspectives concerning special education services for preschool Latino children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(2), 93-102. doi:10.1007/s10643-009-0336-x
- Huang, J., Clarke, K., Milczarski, E., & Raby, C. (2011). The assessment of English language learners with learning disabilities: Issues, concerns, and implications. *Education*, 131(4), 732-739.
- Jitenrda, A. K., Rohena-Diaz, E., & Nolet, V. (1998). A dynamic curriculum-based language assessment. Planning instruction of special needs students. *Preventing School Failure*, 42(4), 182.
- Liu, K., & Barrera, M. (2013). Providing leadership to meet the needs of ELLs with disabilities. *Journal Of Special Education Leadership*, 26(1), 31-42.



Learning disabilities: implications for policy regarding research and practice: A report by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities March 2011. (2011). *Learning*

*Disability Quarterly*, 34(4), 237-241. doi:10.1177/0731948711421756

MacNevin, J. (2011). Best practices in ELL instruction. *Canadian Journal Of Education*, 34(2), 286-288.

O'Connor, R. E., & Klingner, J. (2010). Poor responders in RTI. *Theory Into Practice*, 49(4), 297-304. doi:10.1080/00405841.2010.510758

Reschly, D., Hosp, J., Schmied, C., (2003) And miles to go.....state SLD requirements and authoritative recommendations. Retrieved from

<http://www.nrclid.org/about/research/states/section4.html>

Ruffin, T. M. (2009). Reading strategies: Adaptations to meet the needs of secondary English language learners with learning disabilities. *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal*, 9(1), 22-30.

Schoorman, D., Zainuddin, H., & Sena, S. (2011). The politics of a child study team. *Multicultural Education*, 18(4), 31-38.

Shifrer, D., Muller, C., & Callahan, R. (2011). Disproportionality and learning disabilities: Parsing apart race, socioeconomic status, and language. *Journal Of Learning Disabilities*, 44(3), 246-257. doi:10.1177/0022219410374236

Sheng, Z., Sheng, Y., & Anderson, C. J. (2011). Dropping out of school among ELL students: Implications to schools and teacher education. *Clearing House*, 84(3), 98-103. doi:10.1080/00098655.2010.538755

Sullivan, A. L., & Bas, A. (2013). Disproportionality in special education: Effects of individual and school variables on disability risk. *Exceptional Children*, 79(4), 475-494.

Tong, V. M., Huang, C. W., & McIntyre, T. (2006). Promoting a positive cross-cultural identity: Reaching immigrant students. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, 14(4), 203-208.

U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2013). The condition of education. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cgf.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp)

U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2012). Categories of disabilities under IDEA. Retrieved from <http://nichcy.org/disability/categories>

Valadez, C. M., MacSwan, J., & Mart iacute nez, C. (2000). Toward a new view of low-achieving bilinguals: A study of linguistic competence in designated 'semilinguals'. *Bilingual Review*, 25(3), 238.

Vasquez III, E., Lopez, A., Straub, C., Powell, S., McKinney, T., Walker, Z., & Bedesem, P. L. (2011). Empirical research on ethnic minority students: 1995-2009. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* (Wiley-Blackwell), 26(2), 84-93.  
doi:10.1111/j.1540- 5826.2011.00328.x

Appendix

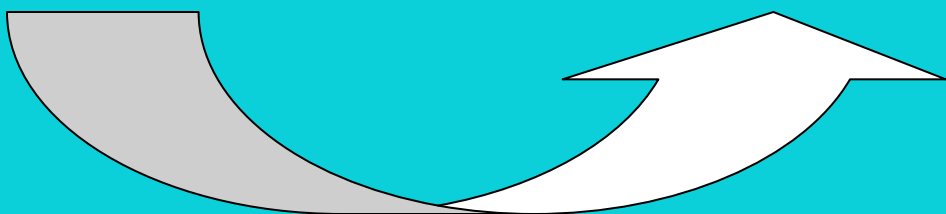
Applied research manuel

THE UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

# A Path to Progress

The Up-Hill Struggle To Better Results for  
English Language Learners .

Claudette Larned



2013

EDCI 589 APPLIED RESEARCH

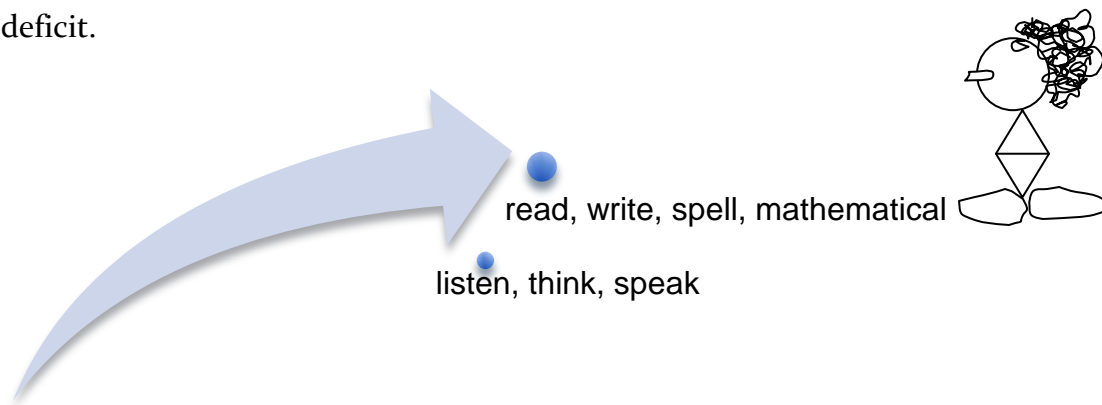
## Starting Out

It is not unlikely, given the impact of acquisition of language on learning, that new teachers will have an “at risk” ELL student in their class. Additionally, given the over representation of ELL students in special education, it is likely, that at some point, a teacher will question whether this student might have a learning disability in addition to difficulties related to language acquisition. Diagnosis of a learning disability is an exclusionary process. Once other factors are ruled out, a learning disability is considered. The process for evaluating students for learning disabilities begins long before the student is identified. This manual is intended to help new put into place good practices to minimize the risk of improper identification, and to build their ability to contribute to the discussion and make educated decisions when faced with the challenging decision making process.

This manual is in no way intended to be all inclusive text on teaching ELLs, nor a complete text on learning disabilities, but rather offers an entry point to new teachers involved in educating “at risk” ELL learners. The manual offers basic steps teachers can take before class starts, early in the first months, and items to consider during the evaluation process, should the student be considered for identification. The steps include cross specialty vocabulary that teachers should be familiar with and pertinent resources that can provide further support.

## Understanding The Issue

Many people incorrectly refer to a broad range of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, and autism as “learning disabilities.” In the context of education, a learning disability has a specific meaning. Although there are varying definitions for a learning disability, in general, it means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. It is considered a within child deficit.



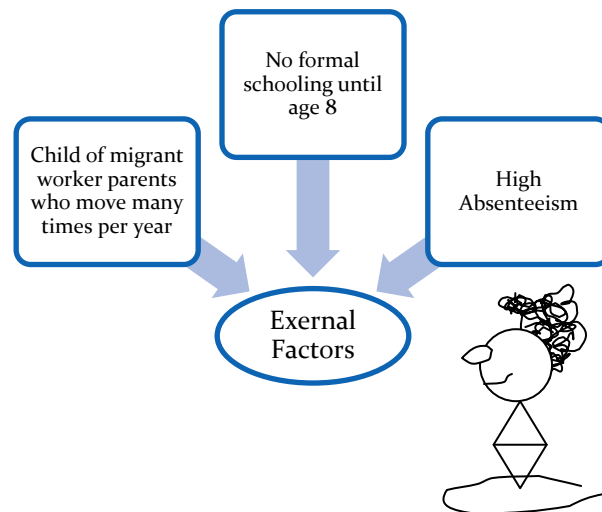
It is not curable, and the condition will persist through out the student’s life. That is not to say, that people with learning disabilities cannot learn. The process will be more challenging, and it is likely that the student will use modifications or have to learn adaptations to overcome the deficit.

The process of acquiring a second language may result in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, or spell in that language, and can affect the

students ability to understand instruction in academic content areas, including mathematics. This can result in the same imperfect ability to do mathematical calculations. In this respect, the symptoms of acquiring a second language are similar to those of a learning disability. For some, these difficulties may mask an underlying learning difficulty for some children who have difficulties due to both language acquisition and learning difficult. For many, the difficulties are a reflection of

- the time needed to acquire a second language and
- the adequacy of the instruction provided

and are NOT within child deficits, but are the consequence of external factors.



As a result, with proper instruction, the child need not have any lifelong consequences.

Students learning another language may have different pragmatic skills and cultural norms that affect education. Some may exhibit high deference to

authority, while others may have norms that question authority or even encourage arguing with teachers. Some cultures value individual achievement while others value group work and frown on behaviors that call attention to individual success. The use of physical touch and distances between parties who are conversing are all areas that vary among cultures. When the student's behavior is different from the norms of the classroom, concerns can arise that the student has a learning disability rather than understanding the impact the student's culture is having on the educational process.

**Caution: A child who:**

- *may have trouble learning the alphabet, rhyming words, or connecting letters to their sounds;*
- *may make many mistakes when reading aloud, and repeat and pause often;*
- *may not understand what he or she reads;*
- *may have real trouble with spelling;*
- *may have very messy handwriting or hold a pencil awkwardly;*
- *may struggle to express ideas in writing;*
- *may learn language late and have a limited vocabulary;*
- *may have trouble remembering the sounds that letters make*
- *may have trouble understanding jokes, comic strips, and sarcasm;*
- *may have trouble following directions;*
- *may mispronounce words or use a wrong word that sounds similar;*
- *may have trouble organizing what he or she wants to say or struggle for words*
- *may not follow the social rules of conversation, such as taking turns, and may stand too close*
- *may confuse math symbols and misread numbers;*
- *may not be able to retell a story in order (what happened first, second, third); or*
- *may not know where to begin a task or how to go on from there.*

**Is a child who: may have a learning disability or could simply be a child who is struggling to master a second language.**

Adapted from: <http://nichcy.org/disability/specific/ld>

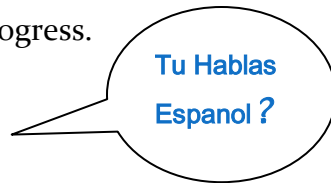


## Step 1: Understand Your Student's English Language Proficiency Levels

### Need to Know:

English placement tests are performed in order to assess the student's proficiency in English. Proficiency is important students must be able to understand the content in order to learn. Teachers should carefully examine the test results and talk to the English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher or specialist to understand the child's results. Collaborating with ESOL teachers from the beginning will help teachers to understand the needs of the student and to provide appropriate instruction and supports from the beginning. This can be a significant factor in student progress.

### Lingo in ESOL:



- Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) is described as the language needed to interact in social contexts. It is usually occurs in contextualized situations, and is not cognitively demanding. This type of language skill takes approximately 1-2 year to acquire.
- Cognitive Academic Language proficiency (CALP) refers to the formal academic learning that requires listening, speaking, reading and writing about academic content. Academic language takes 5-7 years or longer to develop.

Teachers can become confused about student's needs when they have developed social language involved in BICS and not the academic language involved in CALP. Teachers are more likely to attribute educational difficulties to a learning disability rather than to language acquisition problems as a result of this lack of understanding in how language is acquired in different phases.

**Questions to Ask:**

- 1) What test was used to evaluate the language proficiency level of this student?
- 2) Is a teacher report available?
- 3) What supports or examples do the test makers provide that will help me better understand the results?
- 4) How can I use this data?
- 5) What instructional support does my student need to access the curriculum and be successful in school?

**Local School Data:**

*Prince William County* administers the following Language proficiency Tests:

- WIDA Access Placement Test (1-12 W-APT) – Placement test used for entering students in grades 1-12 to establish English proficiency and to help guide placement.
- Kindergarten Measurement of Developing English Language (K-Model) – placement test used for entering kindergarten students used to help determine English proficiency and guide placement levels. Can also be used as an interim progress monitoring assessment
- Access for ELL- Accessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-State for Language Learners- Annual assessment used to monitor development of English language skills.

- Alternative Access for ELLs- A English language proficiency test for students with significant cognitive difficulties that prevents their participation in ACCESS for ELL Is available for grades 1-12 only, although a kindergarten version is in the works.

**Example of Supports offered by WIDA**

The World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA), a consortium that produces the tests used in *Prince William County* has a website at: <http://www.wida.us/index.aspx> that provides details for each of the tests mentioned. WIDA also provides Can Do lists such as the one below. Their Can Do lists help teachers to understand what a child at a certain grade level and language proficiency might be able to do with respect to different functions of language such as listening, reading, writing and speaking. They also provide these descriptors in Spanish, which can help teachers to communicate to parents the results of the test and implications for classroom challenges. An example below is from the website: [http://wida.wceruw.org/standards/CAN\\_DOs/index.aspx](http://wida.wceruw.org/standards/CAN_DOs/index.aspx)

	Level 1 Entering	Level 2 Beginning	Level 3 Developing	Level 4 Expanding	Level 5 Bridging	Level 6 Reaching
LISTENING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Match oral language to classroom and everyday objects</li> <li>Point to stated pictures in context</li> <li>Respond non-verbally to oral commands or statements (e.g., through physical movement)</li> <li>Find familiar people and places named orally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sort pictures or objects according to oral instructions</li> <li>Match pictures, objects or movements to oral descriptions</li> <li>Follow one-step oral directions (e.g., "stand up"; "sit down")</li> <li>Identify simple patterns described orally</li> <li>Respond with gestures to songs, chants, or stories modeled by teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow two-step oral directions, one step at a time</li> <li>Draw pictures in response to oral instructions</li> <li>Respond non-verbally to confirm or deny facts (e.g., thumbs up, thumbs down)</li> <li>Act out songs and stories using gestures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find pictures that match oral descriptions</li> <li>Follow oral directions and compare with visual or nonverbal models (e.g., "Draw a circle under the line.")</li> <li>Distinguish between what happens first and next in oral activities or readings</li> <li>Role play in response to stories read aloud</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Order pictures of events according to sequential language</li> <li>Arrange objects or pictures according to descriptive oral discourse</li> <li>Identify pictures/realia associated with grade-level academic concepts from oral descriptions</li> <li>Make patterns from real objects or pictures based on detailed oral descriptions</li> </ul>	Write in grade-level Listening expectations below:

Image Copied from: [http://wida.wceruw.org/standards/CAN\\_DOs/index.aspx](http://wida.wceruw.org/standards/CAN_DOs/index.aspx)



### For New Teachers

Studies indicate that students who are socially proficient, but not academically proficient are more likely to be referred for special education service. This may be because the aspect of language is discounted due to the social proficiency, and a within child deficit is attributed. Professionals may not be aware, or may disregard the time it takes to develop academic language or the difference between social and academic language.

## Step 2 Planning Instruction

### Use Techniques You Already Know

Certain instructional practices have been shown to be beneficial with all students this includes:

- ❖ Using graphic organizers, story maps and other visual support to help students understand and see the relationship between items. Especially important for Ells, organizers help students easily identify important information and lower the language needed to understand the topic.
- ❖ Incorporating manipulatives, and utilizing visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile instructional techniques – learning style preferences and methods vary from person to person and within cultures.
- ❖ Build upon prior knowledge and strengths
- ❖ Connect student learning to past experiences
- ❖ Create authentic learning tasks- students more easily transfer learning to a new task when the information has been learned through the completion of an authentic task.

### Add New Techniques

Additional techniques that benefit English Language Learners Specifically:

- ❖ Include English Language instruction as part of content instruction- ELLs have different learning needs in that they must also progress in development of English language content.

- ❖ Control language used in instruction- students must be able to get the gist of the content. Explicitly explain the learning goal. Discuss key vocabulary and develop meanings prior to use in the instruction. Explain idioms or other expressions or content that requires the student to understand certain contexts or associations.
- ❖ Design opportunities for students to interact with peers. Peer to peer activities encourage language development and learning. In its 2007 report on Best Practices for ELLs, the Department of Education recommends that teachers “schedule about 90 minutes a week with activities in reading and language arts that entail students working in structured pair activities.” (Gersten, Baker, Shanahan, Linan, Collins & Scarcella, 2007) It should be noted that small group activities were less effective, and that pair work was the key.
- ❖ Have students verbalize thoughts (learning by verbalizing and receiving feedback)
- ❖ Provide feedback and encouragement- initially focus on effort not accuracy to encourage students to participate. Less proficient ELLs will likely make many mistakes early on as they battle learning the language and the content. It is important that their efforts be recognized, even if the results include many mistakes.

### Instructional Resources:

- Institute of Education Sciences: What Works Clearing House is a great resource to locate research-based practices.  
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Topic.aspx?sid=6>
- Florida Center for Reading Research  
<http://www.fcrr.org/>
- Colorin colorado  
A bilingual site for families and educators of English language learners  
[http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/ell\\_resourc](http://www.colorincolorado.org/educators/ell_resourc)
- National Center for Accessible Instructional Materials  
<http://www.cast.org/udl/>

**Did you know???**

Students who fail to respond to instruction are more likely to be taught by poorly qualified teachers, or teachers who lack experience? Despite the fact that poor quality instruction is an exclusionary feature under learning disabilities, teacher experience is closely linked to identification of learning disabilities.

**Step 3 Creating a Multicultural Classroom**

A multicultural classroom is more than one that celebrates a few holidays or studies about another culture once a year. A multicultural classroom incorporates the art, stories, and events of different cultures into instruction to help students relate content they are learning to their own cultural experiences. A multicultural classroom includes books and texts written by diverse writers, and includes stories from other cultures. It includes text books that reveal culturally relevant role models for students from different backgrounds, not just in history, but in math, and science and other areas as well. By incorporating small steps through out the year, teachers can reduce misconceptions about a student's abilities that may result from cultural differences or communication styles and increase student learning.

**To Do:**

- 1) Explore systems of beliefs, customs or traditions that may impact student learning
- 2) Learn about cultural attitudes or mannerisms that may be at odds with American institutions
- 3) Use culturally relevant material to facilitate understanding of content, to promote discussion, and make connections to the student's life that will help the student apply knowledge learned across different situations.
- 4) Foster a positive self-image and easing the transition between cultures

### Question- Where do I start?

For a new teacher, the beginning step to creating a multicultural classroom is by:

#### (1) Establishing a diverse reading library

Which would include a variety of texts written by authors from a variety of cultures, including fairy tales and stories from cultures and that include other cultures in pictures and photos in texts. Students of all cultures should see images of themselves in the literature. Resources for finding multicultural texts:

- ✓ School Libraries :  
Are a great resource to obtain books for the classroom library. Young teachers usually must build their libraries over time. In the mean time, borrowing from the school or public library is a great method to supplement the classroom library. Many libraries also offer books in foreign languages. Parents, who may also not be fluent in English, can read to students in their home language.
- ✓ Cooperative Children's Book Center:  
Provides a list of books that are culturally relevant and appropriate for different ages.  
<http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/detailListBooks.asp?idBookLists=42>
- ✓ Critical Multicultural Pavilion: Provides additional information for taking steps to create a multicultural classroom.  
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/buildingblocks.html>

#### (2) Using Differing Media Presentations

The book " My name is Maria Isabel" , is written by Alma Flor Ada, a Cuban born writer. The book explores the issues of identity and understanding. Targeted for the 7-9 year old range, it can easily be incorporated into discussions about going to a new school, families, valuing traditions and even a discussion about teaching practices that may make children feel uncomfortable. In this story, the teacher calls the student by a different name, and the child doesn't want to tell the teacher she wants to be called Maria Isabel. Maria Isabel has special family ties to her name. This can open up a conversation about different norms, and practices, cultures, making mistakes, being culturally aware, families etc.

A talk from the author is available on line at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiROVQwTL7k>

Provides students with the image of successful writers who may share cultural background or experiences other than the mainstream white culture. Both the book and the author's discussion promote diversity and the love of reading. Parts of this talk would be appropriate for all ages, and presents a positive image of culturally diverse people. This portion could easily be incorporated into a discussion about the author, where authors get their stories, on immigration.

## **Step 4 (Part A) Parent Teacher Involvement is a 2-Way Street**

### **The First Way: Asking Parents to go Down a New Road**

Parent involvement correlates with increased attendance, increased achievement, increased graduation rates and more positive school experiences. While many teachers feel that ELL parents are uninterested and uninvolved, research indicates that many ELL parents want to be involved, but barriers to involvement continue. Many don't know how what opportunities exist, or are unfamiliar with school structures.

### **Question To Ask:**

How can I get the parents involved with their student's education?

### **To-do:**

- 1) Obtain your school policy on parent volunteering and disseminate it to parents
- 2) Take advantage of school events or create your own opportunities to meet and interact with parents
- 3) Establish two way communications –this includes using translators when ever possible.



- 4) Send home weekly or daily homework journals and information that allows parents to support the children at home.
- 5) Seek administrative support for parent involvement
- 6) Provide training to parents on a variety of ways they can be involved and engaged
- 7) Offer low-level commitment activities initially.

### **Local School Data:**

#### **Volunteering**

“Excerpts from guidelines for parent groups, volunteering for Prince William County. Individual schools should have additional written policies.”

*Prince William County Public Schools* encourages parents, guardians, and teachers to form approved organizations in each school for the purpose of enhancing the special relationship between the school and community, and to foster communication between parents and teachers. Students may be included in such organizations.

Active participation in a parent-teacher organization, including attendance at meetings and activities, shall be considered a professional responsibility of teachers and other members of the school faculty. The principal has authority to require attendance of teachers at selected activities.

#### **Volunteer Selection**

All non-contract volunteers who serve the school on a regular basis, identified as 15 or more hours in any given week, must meet the criteria stated below unless exceptions are approved by the appropriate associate superintendent or designee:

- Complete an online application;
- Provide two written references from individuals who have direct knowledge of the applicant’s job performance and character. One reference must be the most recent supervisor or manager;
- Provide verification of negative tuberculosis (TB) results reported within the last twelve (12) months prior to the volunteer effective date;
- Reference verification; and
- Clear Fingerprint and CPS screenings

#### **Resources:**

**Training Offered by *Prince William County* for Limited English Language Parents to help them become engaged in their students learning:**

Parent Education and Training: *Prince William County* offers PEP classes for parents of ELL students. The classes take up 32 hours over the course of the school year and offer language instruction and education about the American system of education. Major units of study include:

- The United States School System
- School Personnel and the School Day
- School Procedures
- Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Report Cards and Curriculum
- Study Skills and Homework

Parents as Educational Partners (PEP): Contact the *Prince William County* School District. Copied from:

<http://esol.departments.pwcs.edu/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1390315/File/PEP/PEPBrochure.pdf?sessionid=>

#### **Step 4 (Part B) Going down the road yourself.**

Some parents will come to meetings, seminars or other offerings, volunteer, and support their students at home. While this is the ideal, many parents are unable or unwilling to offer this level of support. We must meet parents where they are at. Many parents' economic situations prevent them from participating at school, while others may lack the language needed to feel comfortable interacting in the school environment. Take the time to establish a personal rapport your student's family.

**To do:**

- ✓ Change your concept of “parent” to include grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and other extended family members who may play active roles in your student’s life.
- ✓ Learn about families and their educational experiences.
- ✓ Visit places your students shop, and attend cultural events offered in the community.
- ✓ Learn a few words in the student’s first language to show parents your interest and receptiveness to their culture.



Provide translators when possible and insure adequate time for situations where translation is occurring- there are many free online translation services that also can be used for everyday communications. Although one parent may speak English, it is important that translation for the other parent is provided so that that parent doesn’t feel marginalized.

**Caution:**

Teachers tend to see involvement as the school providing information to the parents, and occurring at the school. The goal should be to improve parent engagement. Engagement is a two way street where both parties interact equally. Soliciting parent input for activities and incorporating needs identified by parents can help to create the support and positive relationship that will support student learning.

**Really Great Resources for Engaging Limited English Proficient Parents:**

“Increasing Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parent Involvement”

Located at:

[http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/standards\\_resources/resources/increasing\\_parent\\_involvement.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/esl/standards_resources/resources/increasing_parent_involvement.pdf)

Colorin Colorado:

<http://www.colorincolorado.org/principals/family/>

## Step 5 Global Screening and Progress Monitoring

### ~~How does my student compare?~~

As the year goes on, additional information on student achievement will become available as screenings occur and students participate in the curriculum. It is likely that many ELL students will be placed in the “at risk” group, since language acquisition processes impact all aspects of learning. Teachers may wonder if the trouble is only language or if it is related to a learning disability. A natural tendency is to compare student progress.

#### **Caution:**

Do not assume students who speak the same language or who are at similar language proficiency levels are peers. ELL students are a heterogeneous population that have a wide range of backgrounds, speak different languages and have varying levels of English proficiency. They likely have had dissimilar life and educational experiences, have spent varying amounts of time in the United States, come from different cultures etc. A peer for this population would be someone who matched on all these levels. It is unlikely that the “other ELL” in class is truly a peer. As a result, teachers must be cautious in making comparisons.

#### **Questions! Questions! Questions:**

How will I know if it is working?  
Some students do better and then drop back, Why?  
Others seem to always need extra help. Why?  
Why isn't this working?

You will not be alone in this process; however, do not assume that students who respond to interventions but then need help again, are learning disabled. Because of the roll and significant impact that language plays in learning, classroom instruction may be insufficient to meet the needs of

many ELLs. Students may cycle back and forth between receiving intervention services and not receiving services. Students may also simply stay in intervention for long periods. The purpose of RTI is to close the educational gap, not to determine if the student has a learning disability.

### What TO DO when things aren't working:

- 1) Is the research based method you are been tested and shown results for ELLs?
- 2) Examine the tools and tests you use to assess students to determine if they are normed for the ELL population. Data from tests that are not normed for this population are inherently unfair. Tests may have biases, language demands, and content that are not known by the ELL. Additionally, if not normed to the ELL population (which many are not) then any determination of typical acquisition level or rate of progress, at best, must be considered cautiously.
- 3) Use curriculum-based measurements and general outcome measures as a tool to determine the effectiveness of the instruction but not the ability of the child. Many “research based methods” are not yet proven effective for ELLs. Keep track of what works, and what doesn't, but keep in mind that the goal of measurement is to monitor growth so that instruction can be changed as needed.
- 4) When students aren't making progress, change instruction not the goal. Low expectations of students may cause teachers to limit the curriculum versus creating accommodations that allow students to access the full curriculum.
- 5) Keep in mind that CBMs and GOMs offer a snap shot of the student, but doesn't tell why the results are the way they are. Keep notes as to why you think certain techniques or instructional programs worked or didn't. This may help to

identify trends, and can be useful information should the student be evaluated for a learning disability.

### Local Data:

A few of the global screening and progress monitoring Tools used in *Prince William County Schools*:

#### *Data Item 1*

***aimesweb: Reading*** – provides universal screening and progress monitoring tools for oral reading fluency. This program offers an ELL report profile that provides comparison to the rate of progress to other ELLs at that student’s proficiency level. While this may offer a general picture of progress compared to a wide group of ELLs and could be used perhaps to rule out LD (i.e. the student is performing better than others at his level), teachers should be cautious in using this as an indicator of a learning disability or broader “within” child deficits. ELL proficiency level is only one way in which “peers” may be the same, but life experiences, time in the U.S., prior literacy and education are factors not addressed by this measure. As a result, children with similar proficiency levels may have very different experiences and backgrounds that impact progress.

#### *Data Item 2*

***aimesweb: Behavior***- provides universal screening for behavioral and emotional problems, prosocial behavior problems, and problems with motivation to learn.

#### *Data Item 3*

***Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Kindergarten*** – PALS is a measure of children’s knowledge of several important literacy fundamentals: phonological awareness, alphabet recognition, concept of word, knowledge of letter sounds and spelling. It is used in the beginning, middle and end of kindergarten for global screening and progress monitoring. The PALS website offers instructional resources to help teach targeted skills.

**Data Item 4**

**Phonological awareness Literacy Screening for 1-3:** PALS 1-3 is used with children in grades 1, 2, and 3 to identify students at risk of reading difficulties. PALS 1-3 is designed to measure young children's knowledge of important literacy fundamentals and can be used as a diagnostic tool to provide teachers with explicit information to help guide their teaching. It is used for Global Screening and Progress Monitoring.

**Data Item 5**

**imesweb Progress Monitoring Graph:** A great tool for viewing progress and helping students and families to visualize how students are progressing. Many CBMs offer graphing tools and tracking elements.

**Data Item 6****Teacher created Progress Monitoring Chart Progress**

Many CBMs offer graphing tools and tracking elements. A simple chart can extend this to help teachers track their thoughts about student progress and things they see that may not be "required", but can prove useful in identifying trends and will help the teacher to provide accurate information should the student later be evaluated for a learning disability.

CGM Measurement is tracking \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Measurement: \_\_\_\_\_

What method of instruction was used \_\_\_\_\_?

What do I think worked? \_\_\_\_\_

What didn't work \_\_\_\_\_?

Thoughts as to why student performed the way he did? \_\_\_\_\_

Is there any other item that would explain the results? \_\_\_\_\_

**Resources:**

The National Center for Student Progress Monitoring at:

<http://www.studentprogress.org/library/Webinars.asp#ELLReading>

National Center on Response to intervention:

<http://www.rti4success.org/resourcetype/implementing-response-intervention-rti>

## **Step 6: A process of intervention and reflection---When the student are slow to respond to intervention...What teachers should be asking**

### **Questions to Consider:**

Do I understand the comparisons between acquisition of a second language and learning disabilities that lends it to misidentification of ELL students with learning disabilities?

Have I explored the cultural norms that are different from American cultural norms, which may affect my student's education or my perception of my student?

Am I providing effective instruction?

### **TO DO with Parents:**

1. Determine if the student's parents have any concerns about the child
2. Ask parents for help understanding the differences seen in the child
3. If the parents are unable to assist, locate a cultural collaborator (a person in the community who has already transitioned) who can help you understand the student's culture and how it might impact education
4. Insure parents understand what is and are informed on what is occurring at school and the related educational concerns.
5. To DO with other educators:
6. Seek out training or read articles that help improve teaching techniques.
7. Ask other teachers/staff to watch your instruction and complete a review of the session to help improve instruction and/or to check for fidelity to instructional protocols.
8. Improve collaborate with specialist such as ESOL teachers and special education teachers to provide consistent, content and English language instruction in the classroom and during other interventions. Students who are pulled for various interventions can easily receive fragmented and disjointed instruction. Insure that skills are reinforced and extended



through collaborative instruction practices that include deliberate repetition of skills, but eliminate redundancies and discontinuities.

### **TO DO in your classroom:**

1. Insure students are receiving the supports proposed by the child study team.
2. Continue to document the student's strengths, as well as weaknesses.
3. Implement strategies and instruction with fidelity

## **Step 7 When students are referred for Evaluation for Special education Services**

There is a fine line between response to intervention and special education. At some point, whether it is at the parent's request, or the schools suggestions, an evaluation for special education services may be proposed. The definition of Specific Learning Disability (also referred to as a learning disability or LD in this document) as defined by the Individual's with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 is as follows:

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 may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities,

brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia(NICHCY, 2012, p.4)

Students must meet state and federal law requirements to qualify for special education services. Discrepancy Models and Response to Intervention are the two commonly used approaches in identifying LD.

### **The Discrepancy Model**

The Discrepancy model uses as its definition a significant gap between achievement and intellect. This is demonstrated usually as a discrepancy between an IQ test and an Achievement test. Cut points involving achievement levels or rates of growth or both are used to identify low achievement following a process of tutoring for the student. Researchers who have examined a wide variety of discrepancy models have not found a way to quantifiably and with specificity identify which students have learning disabilities. There are different tests, a little reliability among instruments. Although this model has fallen out of favor with researchers, it remains the most common method of evaluation. This model is easily manipulated.

### **Response to Intervention**

IDEA 2004 removed the requirement that a student demonstrate a significant discrepancy and now allows alternate methods of identification. Many institutions are moving toward the Response to intervention (RTI) approach. This model, which is used in Prince William Count Schools, is more accepted by researchers. RTI incorporates global screening and increasing levels of supports and small group instruction, using research based methods. Students who fail to respond to research based instruction may qualify as having a learning disability. Although the process involves rigorous progress monitoring, the levels of professional development and teacher quality can significantly affect the results during the implement of the instruction. When students fail to respond to research based methods of instruction, then a specific learning disability can be found.

However, it should be noted that LD “does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

### Did you know:

Many teachers **believe** that ELL students with significant learning needs or demands would benefit from special education services. Further, a significant number of teachers report overtly trying to circumvent the exclusionary clause in the definition of LD that states the child's difficulties cannot be attributed to language or culture.

The **research shows** that ELL students in special education identified with learning disabilities have poor educational outcomes. This is thought to be in part due to decreased expectations, limited access to the curriculum and few social opportunities. ELL students with learning disabilities tend to spend more time in self-contained classrooms, isolated from peers.

As a **result**, teachers should follow the law to the best of their ability, and do all they can to insure proper placement, as research does not support the fact that ELL students without disabilities will benefit from special education.

**\*Caution:** Although improper identification is a problem, so is unnecessarily delaying identification for students who are in need of the supports that special education can provide.

A large gap exists between research and practice, and new teachers must steer their way down a path, in which, professional judgment must play a roll.

### Revisiting the Teacher and Parent

Ideally, you have made an effort to get to know your students parents, and have established a relationship with them. It is important that you have kept parents up to date with their student's progress. Teachers can facilitate parents understanding and participation in the educational process. Parents are an integral part of the educational team that will make decisions about the child's educational route. It is important both in practice, and by law, that they have a voice in the proceedings.

### To do:

- ✓ Insure that translators are used when the parent speaks another language. Even if one parent speaks English translators should be provided to insure that both parents understand the proceedings and can effectively communicate and participate in their child's education.

- ✓ Allow adequate time for meetings. Understand that if using translators additional time is needed.
- ✓ Listen to and encourage parent input. Parents may be unfamiliar with the process and hesitate to speak up or disagree with the authority figures. It is important that parents are prepared to be part of the team.
- ✓ Ask the parent if they have concerns for their child? Many times parents are aware of difficulties prior to school personnel bring up issues. Parents can also offer alternative explanations for results. A parent may be the one who has requested the evaluation.

### **Parent Resources for Learning about LD or Special Education:**

*Prince William County School Parent Resource Center:*

14715 Bristow Rd., Manassas, VA 20112

[http://specialeducation.departments.pwcs.edu/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1007119/File/PRC/PRCBrochureEnglishfinal%208-12-12\\_1.pdf](http://specialeducation.departments.pwcs.edu/modules/groups/homepagefiles/cms/1007119/File/PRC/PRCBrochureEnglishfinal%208-12-12_1.pdf)

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

[www.nichcy@aed.org](http://www.nichcy@aed.org)

Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)

[www.PEAC.org](http://www.PEAC.org)

Northern Virginia Family Services Center

[www.nvfs.org](http://www.nvfs.org)

## **Step 8 The Evaluation Meeting**

**The evaluation process begins with Questions to Ask:**

**What other screening tools are being used to evaluate this student?**

**Do I understand what these tools are and the results?**

Results of testing and reports are made available 48 hours prior to meetings. Read results and encourage parents to read results prior to attending meetings. This allows parents and enough time to gather a list of questions they may have about the results. While many school psychologists do a wonderful job of explaining the results of testing during the meeting, it is easy to fall into the habit of using acronyms and “specialized lingo” that makes understanding the reports difficult to understand even for professionals. As a result, it is the duty of all members of the team to insure that information presented in the meeting is understood and clear.

### **School generated tests and reports that may be administered as a result of an evaluation are:**

- ✚ IQ test -
- ✚ Achievement:
- ✚ Social History Report
- ✚ Hearing and Vision Screenings
- ✚ Teacher Reports
- ✚ Other testing as deemed relevant by the educational team.

IQ tests can be used to rule out intellectual disabilities as a contributor to the lack of progress in the response to intervention model. In the discrepancy model, IQ would be compared to academic achievement to determine that a learning disability existed.

Nonverbal IQ-Nonverbal tests may be administered to limit the impact of language on testing.

Achievement Tests: As indicated by the name, this tests student’s knowledge in a variety of academic areas.

As indicated in early portions of this manual, many tests are not normed for ELL students. As a result, for tests not normed for ELLs, psychologist may not report scores. At times, tests may be administered in the student’s language, however, concerns still exist, as the tests may include culturally referenced materials or other items that a student might not be familiar with. Any test not nor med for the student must be considered cautiously.

### **Other Evaluations:**

- ✚ A social history report, often done by a school social worker, will discuss the students social and health history.

- ✚ Hearing and vision screenings are included to rule out difficulties due to hearing and sight impairments.
- ✚ A teacher report will include information on student academic strengths and weaknesses, and social and behavioral concerns. Student attendance records, work samples and other achievement and progress monitoring results are included as appropriate.

ESOL Teachers will provide input as to the students learning and language proficiency.

While parents are not required to submit a “report”, their concerns and thoughts are documented at the meeting.

## Step 09 Making the Decision

### Some thoughts on the process to reflect on:

While the educational needs of the child should be the driving basis for referrals for special education, not all parties are always in agreement as to whether or not a child needs special education services. Additionally, the process itself can be confusing and lead to a wide range of discretion in determining who is identified. While the teacher or teachers involved in the process should be the ones that play a significant roll in educating the student, this is not always the case. At times, teachers are called into meetings in which they may not know the child, or have little knowledge of the student. Many other parties have input when a child is referred for evaluation including school psychologists and administrators. New teachers can feel unsure of their roll.

Teachers must think ahead as to how they will handle challenging dynamics that may exist between parties with different power in the “team” meetings. Team findings should to be the result of the consensus of the team.

Some questions to think about:

Do I understand my legal obligations as a teacher to insure that students are not identified due to learning problems that are primarily a result of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage?

Do I have questions about the results of testing, reports, or concerns about the student's response to intervention?

Am I an active participant in this process or am I marginalized?

Are the parent's voices being heard?

How can I be a better contributor to the team?

Do I see my agreement with the decision as integral to the process, or am I merely a rubber stamp for a decision that was predetermined?

Have I considered the instruction to insure that this student has received appropriate interventions?

If you are concerned with your answers to any of the above questions, then you must ask yourself "what will I do to change this?"

### References

*Gersten, R., Baker, S.K., Shanahan, T., Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). Effective Literacy and English Language Instruction for English Learners in the Elementary Grades: A Practice Guide (NCEE 2007-4011). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/28883/>*

## Conclusion

The road to providing an excellent education to all students is neither flat nor smooth. New teachers and experienced alike face many challenges created by the gap between research and practice that exists in education. This is never more true than when teaching students who are learning to speak English as a second language, and are struggling in the educational setting. Methods do not yet exist that will answer definitively which students have a learning disability and which are simply struggling with another language. All participants in the current process must continue to educate themselves, and work to improve educational practices as we strive toward better results for all students.



