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The Perils of Multi-lingual Students: "I'm Not LD, I'm L2 or L3."

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ABSTRACT

As more companies and families expand to the global market an increasing number of students are entering international schools outside of their home countries. Each international school is governed and run according to their own policies, but one overarching element remains: the language of instruction is usually English. When English Language Learners enter English dominant environments they often have difficulties acclimating to the language and the classroom. In this paper the authors intend to address some myths about ELL students in the classroom, and shed light on why some students are wrongly identified as having possible SLDs and how we can better help students by looking further at their characteristics.

Keywords: English Language Learners (ELL), specific learning disabilities (SLD), native language (L1), newly acquired language (L2)

While teachers in international schools have historically worked with many English Language Learners (ELL,) due to an influx of immigration to the United States for multiple reasons, including cultural, social, and religion-based, there has been a recent increase of ELL students in both international and U.S. public education systems. This increase has resulted in teachers questioning English instruction practices for these students in addition to how to properly define or identify the necessary procedures to provide optimal instruction. A few questions teachers generally have when gaining new ELL students are 1) how will this influx of ELL students change teachers' teaching styles, and 2) how will the influx of ELL students change the Student Support Services team in a school?

Over the years, there have been many immigrants coming to the United States from many other countries. Some seeking political or religious

asylum, some looking for ways to make a new life for themselves or their families. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey reports the U.S. immigrant population to be was 38,517,234 (Batalova, and Terrazas, 2010). Nearly 100% of the immigrants arriving on U.S. soil have one thing in common. Each immigrant brings with him his own cultural and linguistic background, many of which are very different from the majority of people and students in the United States. MPI reports "In 2009, 80 percent of the entire U.S. population age 5 and older said they speak only English at home. The remaining 20 percent (or 57.1 million people) reported speaking a variety of foreign languages. Of them, Spanish was by far the most commonly spoken language (62.1 percent), followed by Chinese (4.6 percent), Tagalog (2.7 percent), French (including Cajun and Patois, 2.3 percent), Vietnamese (2.2 percent), German (1.9 percent), Korean (1.8 percent), Russian (1.5 percent), and Arabic (1.5 percent) (Battalova & Terrazas, 2010).

Of the 38.5 million foreign born in the United States in 2009, 40.5 percent entered the country prior to 1990, 27.9 percent between 1990 and 1999, and 31.6 percent in 2000 or later (Battalova &Terrazas, 2010). The majority of those immigrants are families with children. Each child that enters the United States adds one to the growing population of ESL/ELL students that are currently being served in the U.S. school systems. ELLs are the fastest growing segment of the student population. In fact, in 2008 ELLs comprised 10.5 percent of the nation's K-12 enrollment (NCTE, 2008).

It is important to define the term learning disability. According to "The State of Learning Disabilities" and the IDEA, the term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written. This may be a disorder, which can manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

Currently 2.4 million students are diagnosed with SLD and receive special education services in schools. This population represents 41% of all students receiving special education. Of the 2.4 million, 66% are males identified with SLD. In public schools, 51% are males. Research shows that an equal number of boys and girls share the most common characteristics of LD- difficulty with reading (IDEA, 2010.)

This paper is intended to look at many of the problems about ELL students, which may first appear to be specific learning disabilities (SLD). This paper is intended to help provide useful information for classroom teachers and school personnel working with ELL students with these difficulties, but is not intended as a diagnosis for a learning disability. In fact, the only way to diagnose a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is to have the child in question tested through a school or a district student

support services team, special education department, or through an official outside testing diagnostician/center, preferably in the student's native language, to give the most accurate reading.

Myth 1:
If we label an ELL as learning disabled, at least they will get some help.

We are giving the child a label, usually attached with a stigma that does not necessarily fit their actual case. Interventions that are specifically geared to help processing, linguistic, or cognitive disabilities often do not help child acquire second language. In fact, special education services can actually limit the kind of learning that ELLS need (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). Special education can complicate the learning process for ELLS since they need a meaningful context in order to process and understand the language around them. They often do not get this due to the fact that in many special education programs, skills are selectively narrowed for mastery and discrete skills are practiced out of context. This is often due to a child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan.) In an IEP, skills and objectives are written for a student based on testing results, and areas of disability. Then the student is given objectives, which may or may not coincide with their language learning needs. If a student is placed into a special education classroom setting, their peers are likely students who are for one reason or another, unable to be good language models. (IDEA, 2010)

According to Artiles and Ortiz (2002) the dropout rates for English language learners are 15-20% higher than the overall number of non-English language learners. This lack of academic success is also the cause for referrals of English language learners to special education, which does not increase the rate of ELLs who graduate (Fernandez, 2013.) According to Sullivan (2011) ELL students placed in special education settings and labeled as learning disabled or speech and language impaired are less likely to be placed in the least restrictive environment (Fernandez, 2013.) This of course goes against national policies instituted by the Individuals Disability Education Act (IDEA, 2010) which was reinstated in 2004 to help maximize the learning for all students by placing students in the least restrictive environment.

Myth 2:
Children Learn a New Language Quickly and Easily

The second and probably most misunderstood myth about ELL students is that a child will learn a new language quickly and easily. The thought is that students who take longer to learn English must have some sort of learning disability. While it often seems to be true that children learn

language quicker than adults, there are a variety of factors, such a language distance, and fluency in native language that can greatly affect language learning. Children often respond to new languages with curiosity and impartiality while adults increasingly look to their own learning and life experiences to help them learn the words, structures and concepts of a foreign language (Degener, 2011).

ELL students often face challenges such as acclimating to a new culture, and status. This can, and often does, interfere with a student's ability to learn English. According to the NCTE, "instructors should strive to use culturally relevant materials to build on students' linguistic and cultural resources, while teaching language through content and themes. Students should be encouraged to use native language strategically, and will be motivated by student-centered activities. English language learning is a recursive process, educators should integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills into instruction from the start." (NCTE, 2008)

Several factors determine how quickly a student learns a new language, such as English. One of the most important is their proficiency in their native language. Students that are less proficient in their native language usually take longer to learn a new language. In fact, in a study conducted, it was found that the most significant variable in how long it takes to learn English is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Another important factor to consider is the language distance. Language distance is the gauge of how different the two languages are from each other. The Defense language institute in Monterrey, California places languages into four categories depending on their average learning difficulty from the perspective of a native English speaker. Indo-European languages, such as Dutch and Spanish are much closer than languages such as Arabic, Korean, or Vietnamese. Because of the large language distance between families that use different writing systems from English, students from other language families outside of the Indo-European language family will on average take longer to learn English (Walqui, 2000).

There are also different timelines for learning social and academic language. Under ideal conditions, the average second-language learner will acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS,) social communicative language, in as little as two years. On the other hand, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP,) or the context-reduced language of academics takes five to seven years under ideal conditions to develop a level of that of native speakers (McKibbin & Brice 2005).

Myth 3:

An ELL student can read, write, or speak well, but not all 3. It is important to note that these separate skills develop at different rates. ELLs share

common challenges with learning to read English as a second or third language that can in fact mirror or imitate characteristics of LD. Phonological awareness tasks become much more challenging when a student's first language does not include the English phonemes addressed in the task (Klingner, 2008). Due to the language distance mentioned previously, it is very difficult for a student to develop or mimic the phoneme being pronounced if it is not present in their first language.

Children with learning disabilities in reading and youngsters who are English language learners are both at risk for low reading achievement, but for different reasons. Children with genuine LDs in reading have intrinsic learning differences often related to problems in processing that impact their word identification skills. ELLs usually learn to read normally in their native language, but they lack sufficient exposure to both written and spoken English (Spear-Swerling, 2006).

ELL students may also struggle with decoding. Letters may look similar across languages within the same rank of language distance, but this doesn't necessarily mean that the letter pronunciations are the same. For example, although most consonants in English and Spanish have similar sounds, the vowels sounds differ (Klingner, 2008). This can cause much confusion in the way that a word is pronounced, or decoded. Often times, languages outside of English rarely work with silent consonants or vowels. When a word with a silent consonant or vowel is being decoded ELL students may actually make the silent sound. For instance, in the English word high, the –igh cluster forms the long sound for the vowel i. In many other languages high would be decoded and pronounced as /h/i/g/h/ which would lead to confusion on the adult and child's part.

The process of learning new sound-symbol correspondence can often seem abstract and confusing. When teaching children to read, we often ask them to think about a word that might make sense when they come to a word they do not know. We call this using context clues to figure out a tricky word. ELLs would also be at a disadvantage when trying to figure out how to decode new words using context clues if the meaning of the words isn't understood (Klingner, 2008).

When writing a new language, students must learn and imitate the words they wish to write, or use decoding and chunking strategies for spelling unknown words. When students do not have a firm handler on the letter-sound correspondence for a language, it is impossible to expect them to be able to write a word using decoding strategies. Likewise, many words in English are words that have strange and unfamiliar vowel or consonant patterns. This would mean that in order for the student to correctly write the word, they would have to memorize the vowel pattern like other English-speaking students. This sounds simple enough.

Then we must take into account that not only are they memorizing a specific spelling or vowel pattern, they must also be able to associate the correct word with the correct meaning. Homophones such as rock, bank, and bend are words that are confusing to ELL students because they are spelled the same, but depending on context can have very different meanings. For instance, you can deposit money in a bank, or sit on a riverbank, or even bank a shot in basketball. These many different meanings can cause confusion in ELL students when trying to use decoding to figure out an unfamiliar word.

Often times, direct instruction of the word and definition helps to clear up confusion, but then other irregularities are placed before the child. Homonyms are likely going to be tricky for ELL students as well. If the specific vowel pattern and meaning of the word are not understood, it may cause an ELL student frustration and a lack of desire to read or write. Speech is often another tricky area for ELL students. This has to do with knowledge of vocabulary and terms, but ELLs are more likely to be confused by figurative language, pronouns, conjunctions and false cognates (Klingner, 2008).

Myth 4:
ELL students should only be instructed in English.

Many teachers may have the feeling that ELL students will learn English faster if they are only instructed in English. This simply is not the case. In fact, students who receive some home language literacy instruction achieve at higher levels in English reading than students who do not receive it (Klingner, 2008).

Instruction in English and interaction with English speakers is certainly an important part of an ELL student's education, however, students who are new to English likely find it challenging, and frustrating. There is a point, where a student stops becoming an active listener and participant, and becomes a passive one.

Child may manifest a common second-language acquisition phenomenon called the silent period (McKibbin & Brice, 2005). This "silent period" is a time, which may be very brief, or could last upwards of a year, when students are more focused on listening and comprehension, rather than speaking, much the way an adult might when visiting a foreign country without knowing the language. Generally speaking, this period is longer for a younger child, and usually shorter for an older learner. At this point, if possible, instruction on the same topics in their native language would lessen the burden of the student for learning the content. When students are passive observers, rather than active participants, they may actually regress in their knowledge.

ELL children make transferences in their knowledge between their native language (L1) and their newly acquired language (L2.) This means that students who are learning a new language may make English errors due to the direct influence of their L1 structure. For example, in Spanish "esta cases es mas grande" means "this house is bigger. However, a direct more literal translation would be "this house is more bigger" (McKibbin & Brice, 2005).While this of course is not grammatically correct, we can see right away where the transference is and how best to help the student fix those grammatical errors. This situation may lend itself to look like a common language deficiency or lack of transference problem that would indicate difficulties in language acquisition, but in reality, the student is making relevant connections between the L1 and L2, which in the long run will help them to be more fluent in both languages.

Some ELL children undergo a phenomenon referred to as subtractive bilingualism. This phenomenon is when a student learning and L2 such as English are not reinforcing their L1 skills and fluency. Therefore their L1 is not maintained. This can be cognitively and linguistically very detrimental to children's language learning and to family life, especially if parents are only able to speak their L1 and not English. Ideally, students should learn via additive bilingualism. Additive bilingualism is where a student learns English while their first language and culture are being maintained and reinforced (McKibbin & Brice, 2005).

CONCLUSION

There are many language-learning issues that exhibit the same characteristics as a student with a learning disability. This paper is of course not intended to diagnose or dismiss a diagnosis of a learning disability in a second language learner. If you feel that a student is having specific difficulties or exhibiting signs of a learning disability, the first and most reliable place to begin your search would be by discussing the issues with an ELL teacher. Your ELL teacher colleague can observe the student and suggest ways to help you further that student's language ability and knowledge in English. If you have discussed issues with your ELL teacher colleague and put interventions into place, but the student is still having difficulties, the next place to check would be with your learning support services team. The support services team, along with the ELL teacher can begin to look at the issues more objectively and decide if there is a further issue to assess. Then, your support services team can begin to look at particular tests for the student to help diagnose a possible learning disability.

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