Distinguishing Language Acquisition from Specific Learning Disabilities

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Alignment to Learning Forward Standards

• The new education law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), redefines professional development with a purposeful influence from Learning Forward.

• Learning Forward, a national association recognized as leaders in professional learning, has established standards for professional learning that set a high bar for quality learning experiences.

• This session aligns to the following standard(s):
  • Learning Communities: Committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.
  • Leadership: Develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems.
  • Resources: Coordinating resources.
  • Implementation: Sustaining support for implementation.
My Story

• Born in Oklahoma
• English Learner
• At-Risk for SPED Placement
• Concurrent Enrollment
• Thesis
Acronyms

- L1=Primary Language
- L2=Secondary Language
- BICS=Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills
- CALP=Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
- CLD=Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
- LEP=Limited English Proficiency
- EL=English Learner
What is OSDE currently working on?

- Currently developing a guidance document that will describe how to assess English Learners (EL), rule out Limited English Proficiency (LEP), determine language dominance, and assessing language.
- It will include samples of pre-referral charts, LEP checklists, and staffing forms.
Language Overview
Two types of bilinguals

The Simultaneous and Sequential Bilingual Learners:

- **Simultaneous bilingualism** takes place when the student learns L1 and L2 at the same time.
- **Sequential bilingualism** occurs when the individual is exposed to L2 after they have already made significant progress towards the acquisition of L1 (Stein, 2016).

  - Children who are exposed to their second language after the age of 3 are considered to be sequential bilingual because their first language has already been established (Stein, 2016).
Early Exposure (before the age of 3) to L2

- Leads to higher levels of proficiency. Often bilingual students are described as “limited in both languages” or as “not having a strong first language.” Yet this depiction fails to take into account their full linguistic repertoire.

- From this perspective, he has a head start towards becoming fully bilingual if his acquisition of both languages was appropriately nurtured. (Escamilla, 2000).
Bilingual Bootstrapping

• The idea that a bilingual child’s development in one language can be advanced by the other dominant language (Stein, 2016).
• If a child’s first language is adequately developed and there is no indication of developmental delays, it can provide the basis for the transfer of what has been mastered in the first language (phonological rules, language structures, and vocabulary) to the second language (Cummins, 1984).
Silent Period

• When the student may understand some or most of what’s being said to them in the new language, but are unable to reproduce much of it.

• Silent period differs in length for each individual learner. This period can last anywhere from a few days to a year.

• During this time, reinforce when the child speaks willingly, pair them up with a child who speaks their native language. This can increase your child’s confidence and shorten the silent period.

• DO NOT pressure the child to talk, embarrass them, or talk about him/her to others.
Response to Intervention (RtI)

Problem-Solving Strategy
RTI is…

• NOT a pre-referral process
  • Meaning it is not something we do before we test to place a child in special education

• NOT about admiring the problem
  • It is about Problem Solving
RtI Teams

A core group of professionals who can review information about the student and provide intervention strategies to assist the regular education teacher in working with EL students could also be part of the framework.

- In addition, Lichtenstein (2008) and others found the incorporation of RTI data within a comprehensive psychoeducational assessment to be the best practice for the identification of learning disabilities for all children, including English Learners.
What an Intervention is NOT

- Moving the student closer to the front of classroom or near teacher or separate location
- Reducing the assignment or reducing the number of items of an assignment
- Re-read directions or read test for student

These are all accommodations
Interventions that are Culturally Responsive

• ...are constructed by intervention design teams
• ...consider students’ language, background experiences, preferred ways of interacting, and home literacy practices and integrate all of these factors in curricular materials, instructional methods, educational environment, involvement of families, and both formative and summative progress monitoring.
• ...are based on a theory of culture in learning
• ...are informed by cultural brokers (Gay, 1993).
Levels of Tiers: Tier 1

- Tier 1: Core Curriculum; All students
- Tier 1 @ Risk: Differentiated Instruction, Small Groups, Teacher Decides. Core Curriculum+Targeted Intervention (teacher choice) (80% of population)
  - Computer Software Programs (e.g., SuccessMaker, Study Island, STAR, etc.)
  - Interventions built into the curriculum
- Use data to plan small groups for all students (not just those at risk).
- Use class-wide data to identify weaknesses and guide core curriculum
Tier 1 Teaching Strategies

Word Sort

When and why you might use this strategy:

- Pre-assess knowledge
- Assess knowledge after teaching
- As a group/whole group/individual
- Spark Curiosity
- Making connections between key vocabulary and concepts
- Matching labels to pictures or ideas
- Word patterns – easier decoding
- Alphabetize
- Parts of speech
- Blends

Directions:

After you have identified your purpose for using this strategy, the teacher will fit this activity into their lesson appropriately. The students will cut out the words. Next, they will organize their words without gluing them down onto a new sheet of paper. If they finish organizing or need help the teacher scaffolds to help the student determine what goes next or questions incorrect placement. Once the pieces are placed correctly, or discussed and corrected (if needed based on your purpose) they can then glue them down.

Examples: What I have done in my classroom:

I have used this strategy in my classroom with students to match pictures to words, sort word families, prefixes and suffixes, plural noun endings, and connect key vocabulary with other key vocabulary.

Variations:

- Picture sort for non-readers
- Sentence sort for assessing comprehension or sequence of events

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Sentence Sort

When and why you might use this strategy:

- Sequence of events/re-telling
- Comprehension
- Pre-assess knowledge
- Assess knowledge after teaching
- As a group/whole group/individual
- Spark Curiosity
- Writing Structures

Directions:

After you have identified your purpose for using this strategy, the teacher will fit this activity into their lesson appropriately. The students will cut out the sentences. Next, they will organize their sentence strips without gluing them down onto a new sheet of paper. If they finish organizing or need help the teacher scaffolds to help the student determine what goes next or questions incorrect placement. Once the pieces are placed correctly, or discussed and corrected (if needed based on your purpose) they can then glue them down.

Examples: What I have done in my classroom:

I have used this strategy with young students for sequence of events and older students using the LEA approach (Language Experience Approach). When I did the LEA approach, we had written about our class pet and all the things she needed to be taken care of. Later, the students were able to write their own version of what she needed in a 5 paragraph essay. We then typed the essays and cut out the sentences one by one. They had to reorganize their writing using main ideas, details, and transition words as clues.

Variations:

- Picture sort for non-readers
- Word sort for making connections between key vocabulary and concepts
Levels of Tiers: Tier 2

• Tier 2a, 2b: Research based interventions. Core Curriculum + Research Based Interventions. (15% of population).

• When a student meets criteria for Tier 2, a qualified staff member will assist in the selection of a research-based intervention.

• Tier 2 students continue to receive Tier 1 At-Risk interventions.
Levels of Tiers: Tier 2 cont’d

• Tier 2 for Lifers-Child will always need Tier 2 Supports and that’s OK.
• The team will develop a specific intervention and monitoring plan, set a goal, and reconvene to review progress
• Intervention during this stage lasts a minimum of 10 weeks
Good and Shinn (1990)

• Why assess for 10 weeks prior to moving to a more intensive Tier?
  • Research by Roland Good & Mark Shinn in 1990 found 10 data points were necessary to have sufficient data to make reliable decisions. Also, Gall & Gall, 2007, supported Good & Shinn’s research, stating again, 10 data points are a minimum requirement for a reliable trend line to make educational decisions.
Build up your Tier 2 Bank

• Have a “bank” of Tier 2 interventions that your team can easily access.
  • Examples of Tier 2 Interventions:
    • Repeated Reading ®
    • Cold/Hot Read ®
    • Say it, Move it ®
    • Cover, Copy, Compare (accuracy) (M)
    • Taped Problems (M)
    • Explicit Timing (R and M)
    • Fold-In/Drill Sandwich ®
    • Fry’s Phrases ®
    • Dolch Sight Words ®
    • Error Correction (R and M)
    • Listening Passage Preview ®
    • Self-Graphing (R and M)
    • Story Detective ®
    • Mystery Motivator (R and M)
    • Positive Reinforcement (R and M)
    • Goal Setting (R and M)
Levels of Tiers: Tier 3

• Tier 3 (SPED/Other service): Core Curriculum+Targeted Intervention+Research Based Intervention+Special Education/EL/Title 1 (<5% of population).

• Tier 3 students continue to receive Tier 2 and Tier 1 at-risk interventions.

• Tier 3 does not always equal Special Education. In fact, Tier 3 could be Title I or EL services to provide intense, prolonged interventions lasting at least one year or longer.
Now what?

So you’ve tried several interventions and still no progress. Now what?

- Pre-Referral Process and Language Assessment
1st Step:
Pre-Referral Process and Language Assessment
Pre-Referral Process: Essential 1\textsuperscript{st} Step

• Pre-referral processes are those procedures that occur before determining that a special education evaluation is necessary.

• Before a pre-referral for a psychoeducational assessment is considered, the school should already have: (a) attempted at least two research-based targeted academic interventions (for at least 10 weeks), (b) gathered information about the student’s profile, and, (c) involved parents or guardians in discussions about concerns and discussed the student at the data review meeting(s).

  • ***If parent requests an evaluation, you must not use “RTI” to deny or delay a timely initial evaluation (OSEP 11-07).
Pre-Referral Process Steps

1. Complete a comprehensive academic “file” review and gather background information.
2. Individualize the student’s intervention.
3. Document the interventions and monitor progress (weekly).
4. Use data-based decision making to determine next steps.
5. Review the home language survey and parent/family interviews.
Pre-Referral Cont’d

• The pre-referral process should include a review of student history, WIDA or other language screener results, academic information, response to intervention data, and any other relevant information.

• Throughout the referral process, look for indicators that may characterize a genuine disability (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2002):
  • Difficulty learning at a normal rate, even with assistance (especially in the L1);
  • Deficits in vocabulary (particularly when deficits also exist in the L1);
  • Communication difficulties at home and with peers of similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds;
  • Report by parents of slower development than siblings.
Assessing Language

- Cumins (1984) suggests that it takes an individual student an average of two to three years to acquire what is referred to as social language. This is known as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS).

- It takes an average of five to ten years (not 5-10 years old) for an individual to acquire academic language skills needed for academic success known as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Yansen & Shulman, 1996).
BICS and CALP

• Examples of BICS: Following general classroom directions, conversing with peers and teachers, and decoding easily.

• Examples of CALP: Following directions for academic tasks, understanding discussion of academic material, expressing reasons and opinions, reading comprehension, and writing an essay to support a point of view.

  • Educators think that because the student is communicating with others, but does not experience academic success, the student may have a learning disability and is often referred for testing.
Assessing BICS

BICS can be assessed by observing the child during recess, free time, lunch, and any other unstructured time. If the child is able to communicate with their friends or interact with peers, they have acquired BICS.
Assessing CALP

• The WIDA helps educators, parents, and students better understand a student’s development of English language proficiency on an annual basis.

• Key components of the WIDA:
  • Used to assess all ELs
  • Measures speaking, listening, reading, and writing
  • Measures academic language (CALP)
  • Scores on the WIDA help you determine the “Can Do Descriptors” for each subtest (speaking, listening, reading, and writing).

• For a child to be considered proficient in academic language (CALP) they must obtain the following scores:
  • 4.5 literacy (reading and writing)
  • 5.0 composite (all 4 subtests overall score).
Assessing CALP Cont’d

• School Psychologists can administer The Woodcock Johnson-IV (WJ-IV) Test of Oral Language. This gives you a CALP score for every assessment cluster. A CALP score of 4 is considered fluent.

• The WJ-IV measures oral language, oral expression, listening comprehension, phonetic coding, and speed of lexical access. The benefit to using the WJ-IV is that you are able to assess in both Spanish and English and obtain a CALP score for both languages.

• If the student does not score in the proficient range, testing MUST be completed in their dominant language.
WIDA Can Do Descriptors

• The purpose of the Can Do Descriptors is to tell educators what language learners can do to participate meaningfully in teaching and learning in academic contexts. These descriptors are broken down into grade level clusters. Here is an example:
  • Grade Level Cluster 1-2 Reading and Writing:
    • Level 1-Entering:
      • Reading: Match icons and symbols to words, phrases or environmental print. Identify concepts about print and text features.
      • Writing: Label objects, pictures, and diagrams
    • Level 2-Beginning:
      • Reading: Locate and classify information, identify facts and explicit messages.
      • Writing: Make lists, produce drawings, phrases, short sentences, notes.
WIDA Can Do Descriptors

• The Can Do Descriptors are also linked to activities based on the child’s scores.

• For example:
  • Grade Level Cluster 1-2 Reading and Writing:
    • Level 1-Entering:
      • Ask the student to match real-life familiar objects to labels. Connect print to visuals (e.g., pictures of food, road signs, familiar objects in a home or school). Have the student match words to common objects they see daily.
    • Level 2-Beginning:
      • Ask students to sort words into word families. Use visuals with words in each word family. Write short stories using high frequency words.

• For more information on the Can Do Descriptors, please go here https://www.wida.us/standards/CAN_DOs/
Now what?

So you’ve tried several research based interventions over a minimum of 10 weeks (lack of progress), you went through the pre-referral process and you still suspect a disability?

- Referral and Assessment Process
2nd Step: Referral and Assessment Process
Referral Process

• After interventions in the regular education classroom have been **exhausted**, the child may be referred for a special education evaluation.

• Federal guidelines dictate what must be included as part of the referral process. A group of qualified professionals and the parent shall review existing data.

• Existing data may include evaluations and information provided by the parents, current classroom-based assessments and observations, and observations by teachers and other qualified related services personnel.
Before Assessing…

• Students who are in the process of learning English will often display academic deficiencies, especially if their education has been disrupted during an immigration experience. The school must follow established procedures for determining between language acquisition and a disability.
Assessment

Litt (n.d.) suggested some questions that must be taken into account when assessing ELs.

• Has the ELs learning problems lasted for a long time?
  • Over time, a language issue will improve if it is indeed a language issue, but a learning disability will not improve over time.

• Does the learning problem still exist after the EL is continually helped in that area?

• Are they improving academically?

• How are the EL’s skills in terms of strengths and weaknesses?
  • Does the EL favor some areas of learning over others (such as writing versus speaking skills)?
Assessment

• English-only may be selected as the mode of assessment if the student is no longer classified EL or if the student has achieved an English CALP score in the four to five range and minimal Spanish CALP (<3).

• On the other hand, if the student’s CALP level in English and Spanish is two and three, respectively, then assessment should be conducted in both English and Spanish in order to establish that a possible disability is evident in both languages.
# Assessment Identification Matrix (AIM)

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**POSSIBLE ASSESSMENT MODALITY**

**FORMAL ASSESSMENT TOOL RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Use informed professional judgment*

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*The tests above are general guidelines. Always use informed professional judgment.*

* Follow your District protocols & procedures, unless they are discriminatory.*

http://bilingualassessment.org/
Assessment

Bilingual (English and Spanish) assessment is appropriate when the student has minimal CALP scores (≤3) in both languages. However, this may indicate that the student is in the process of acquiring proficiency in one or both languages, or may have a speech and language impairment (SLI). If this is the case, it is advisable to consult with your speech and language therapist for further guidance.
Assessment

• Caution should be exercised in interpreting the results of nonverbal assessments as the most valid estimate of the IQ of a bilingual student, especially if verbal ability data have not been collected in both languages.

• According to Ortiz (2004), technically sound tests of intelligence do not exist in languages other than English. It is necessary for evaluators to have knowledge of:
  • The adequacy of representation of each norm or comparison group
  • The full range of what is being measured and what is not
  • The inherent and linguistic demands and cultural loading of each test
Team Considerations

- All meetings regarding an EL must include personnel with qualifications and/or expertise in second language acquisition to rule out Limited English Proficiency (LEP) as the determining factor in eligibility decisions. If the student was assessed in English, then the disability should manifest in English.

- The assessment must be comprehensive and include information on language proficiency, communication, academics, and cognitive.

- If the student was assessed in their native language, then the disability must be present in their native language. A student cannot have a disability in one language, but not in another.
3rd Step: Determining Eligibility
Determining Eligibility

In addition to the required specific learning disability eligibility criteria, the evaluation group must make a determination using a convergence of multiple sources of data that demonstrate the following:

1. Response to General Education Intervention(s)
2. The Student’s Level of Performance
A widely accepted method for determining whether a student has a Learning Disability under RTI is the “dual discrepancy model” (Fuchs, 2003).

Dual Discrepancy is **NOT** the same as a discrepancy between ability and achievement.

- The student is found to be performing academically at a level significantly below that of his or her typical peers (discrepancy in initial skills or performance).
- Despite the implementation of one or more well-designed, well-implemented interventions tailored specifically for the student, he or she fails to “close the gap” with classmates (discrepancy in rate of learning relative to peers).
Determining Eligibility for SLD

• Using the traditional discrepancy model on SLD children has led to educational misplacement and poor intervention (Abedi, 2008).

• It is important to note that in order for a true specific learning disability to exist, it must be manifested in both L1 and L2. To distinguish a true disability from normal EL development, the school psychologist will have to use a psychoeducational assessment utilizing “nondiscriminatory assessment procedures” (IDEA, 1997).
Determining Eligibility cont’d

• EL students are not required to be in the United States for a period of time, nor are they required to receive English-language instruction before special education assessments can be provided.

• A child cannot be denied a full and individual educational evaluation based on Limited English Proficiency. However, upon completion of the administration of assessments and other evaluation measures, a group of qualified professionals and the parent of the child determine whether the child is a child with a disability.
Similarities and Differences between Language Acquisition and Specific Learning Disability
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviors Associated w/ LD</th>
<th>Behaviors when Acquiring an L2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty following directions</td>
<td>Difficulty following directions because the directions were not well understood; it can be harder to remember directions in a second language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with phonological awareness</td>
<td>Difficulty auditorily distinguishing between sounds not in one’s first language, or sounds that are presented in a different order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence</td>
<td>Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when it is different than in one’s first language. Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in the first language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words</td>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings are not understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty retelling a story in sequence</td>
<td>Difficulty retelling a story in English without the expressive skills to do so; yet the student might understand more than s/he can convey (i.e., receptive skills in English might be stronger than expressive skills).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion with figurative language</td>
<td>Confusion with figurative language, idioms, pronouns, conjunctions, and words with multiple meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow to process challenging language</td>
<td>Slow to process challenging language because it is not well understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May have poor auditory memory</td>
<td>May seem to have poor auditory memory if sounds or words are unfamiliar or not well understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May have difficulty concentrating</td>
<td>Learning in a second language is mentally exhausting; therefore, ELLs may seem to have difficulty concentrating at times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May seem easily frustrated</td>
<td>Learning in a second language can be frustrating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When children are learning English as a second language:</td>
<td>When children have a language impairment or disorder:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• it is typical for their skills in English vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension to be less well-developed than their peers who only speak English.</td>
<td>• errors or limited skills in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and comprehension interfere with communication in their first language (L1), compared to peers from the same language group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• they will acquire English in a predictable developmental sequence, similar to younger children who are beginning to learn English.</td>
<td>• their English skills are delayed in comparison to peers from the same language group who have been learning English for the same length of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reduced opportunities to use their first language may result in loss of competence in L1 before becoming proficient in English.</td>
<td>• their communication is impaired in interactions with family members and others who speak the same language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• they may switch back and forth between L1 and English, using their most sophisticated skills in both languages within single utterances.</td>
<td>• skills in their first language will be limited, inappropriate, or confused in content, form, or use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• results from assessments conducted in English are unlikely to reflect the child’s true skills and abilities in most domains.</td>
<td>• assessments conducted in English will be unable to discriminate between language acquisition and language disorder.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: OSPI Pamphlet, p. 12)
Use of Translators and/or Interpreters

• A major problem faced by school personnel is the availability of trained translators and interpreters. Schools should recruit and train members of the community to act as translators/interpreters.

• Translators and interpreters should not be used interchangeably. They have different meanings and functions. A translator is one who conveys information that is written. An interpreter is one who conveys information from one language to the other orally (Weber, 1990). Translators may be able to give information in oral and written modalities.

• Interpreters must be able to communicate statements and concepts appropriate to educational settings.
Final Thoughts

• It is important to note that in order for a true specific learning disability to exist, it must be manifested in both L1 and L2.
  • To distinguish a true disability from normal EL development, the school psychologist will have to use a psychoeducational assessment utilizing “nondiscriminatory assessment procedures” (IDEA, 1997).

• Use **multiple sources of data.** No single procedure should be used as the sole criterion for determining whether an EL child or student has a disability.

• You must assess the child in their native language or other mode of communication.
  • You can use translators/interpreters.
Resources

• Evidence/Research-based interventions
  • Where can I find them?
    • The best website for interventions:
      • www.fcrr.org (Florida Center for Reading Research)
      • http://www.fcrr.org/for-educators/sca_k-1.asp
      • http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ (What Works Clearinghouse)
      • http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu
      • www.interventioncentral.org
      • www.free-reading.net
Questions/Comments?

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