

A Literature Review of the Challenges & Best Practices for English Language Learners

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Abstract

English Language Learners (ELL) face challenges in schools because they often do not receive adequate linguistic support in a typical classroom. These students do not have access to appropriate second language acquisition resources, and therefore they are sometimes misdiagnosed with a cognitive delay. English Language Learners are then placed in a restrictive special education classroom as a disproportionate rate. This article examines the best practices for teaching English Language Learners.

In the United States, English is the most common language of instruction in most if not all schools. However, for students whose first language is not English, the expectation to quickly comprehend class content can pose a particularly burdensome obstacle. These students, known as English Language Learners, cannot communicate effectively in the language of instruction when compared to their native English-speaking peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013), English Language Learners make up over 9 percent of the student population in the United States as of the 2011-2012 school year. That is an estimated 4.1 million students who are in need of language support services to help them achieve academically.

In order to evaluate their ability to perform in an English-dominant classroom, English Language Learners are tested for language proficiency through a battery of assessments. If the student is unable to competently communicate in English, it is not only considered an academic hindrance, but often the student is misdiagnosed as having a cognitive delay. English Language Learners' emerging language is often confused with language disability or disorder and English Language Learners students are often inappropriately referred for special education services (Sullivan, 2011). It is difficult to estimate exactly how disproportionate the rate of misidentification and placement for special education services is because there is no mandate requiring districts to report such information. However, it is confirmed that there is a greater percentage of linguistically diverse students, like English Language Learners, receiving special education services than expected (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Consequently, there is a disproportionate number of English Language Learners identified as having learning disabilities.

In addition to understanding the frequent special education misdiagnosis, it is critical to examine the achievement gap of English Language Learning students when compared to their

native English-speaking counterparts. Not only are English Language Learners performing below the level of their peers in language-related instruction, but English learners also show notable gaps in core subject areas due to high language demands (Alt, Arizmendi, Beal, & Hurtado, 2013). Thus, these lack of resources and support lead to disparities in academic achievement.

Alongside the stigmas associated with low achievement, English Language Learners placed into special education classrooms often do not receive adequate services that accommodate their specific learning needs. As a result of misdiagnosing English Language Learners with a cognitive delay rather than addressing their language learning, English Language Learners are placed in special education where they do not have access to appropriate testing accommodations or teachers equipped to tackle their specific linguistic needs. The justification for special education placement is that the English Language Learner demonstrates an inability to speak English and that the language deficit puts the student at an academic and linguistic disadvantage to learn. However, it should be argued that ELL students are at an environmental disadvantage (Sullivan, 2011, p. 317). English Language Learners are too frequently referred and are often misrepresented as cognitively delayed or mentally disabled rather than having poor language skills.

One qualitative interview study gathered information about the number of English Language Learners who were misidentified as having learning disabilities. The study focused on students who are middle school-age (grades 6-8) from three midsized New York State school districts. State data was used to identify school districts that consisted of at least 10 percent English Language Learners and 5 percent of English Language Learners with learning disabilities. The research team conducted semi structured interviews with district and school administrators, school support personnel, specialist teachers, and general classroom teachers. Researchers found that there was a disproportionate identification of English Language Learners who were diagnosed with learning disabilities (Sanchez, Parker, Akbayin, & McTigue, 2010).

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the reasons for the misidentification of English Language Learners to special education services, to illustrate the challenges that English Language Learners students face in education, to discuss the limitations of available services available to English Language Learners, and to explore suggestions for best practices in teaching and understanding English Language Learners.

Discussion

Achievement Gap

English Language Learning students are unable to read, write, and perform in the standard language of schools—English—which immediately puts them at a crippling disadvantage. Because English Language Learners cannot yet communicate adequately in English, they may appear to be low cognitive functioning when compared to their English-speaking counterparts. Overreferrals to special education become prevalent because limited language proficiency is often confused with cognitive disability.

English Language Learners may be chastised for their inability to communicate effectively in English; this difficulty may be highlighted when the English Language Learners

are asked to complete core subject tasks that require English language proficiency. For example, English Language Learners may struggle on mathematics problem-solving tasks because the task requires sufficient linguistic understanding of English (Alt et al., 2013).

National assessments reveal the achievement gap between English Language Learners and English-speaking peers. Specifically, The National Assessment of Education Progress reported that native English speakers outperformed English Language Learners on the core subjects of mathematics, social studies, reading and science. The National Assessment of Education Progress data reflect “subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences, and school environment for populations of students (e.g., all fourth-graders) and groups within those populations (e.g., female students, Hispanic students)” for grades 4, 8, and 12 across the nation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014, para. 7). There are linguistic accommodations tailored specifically for English Language Learners on the National Assessment of Educational Progress; so, it is unclear why there is an achievement gap between English Language Learners and native English speakers in core subject performance on the assessment. These data do not explain the low academic performance among English Language Learners, but point out the need for more individualized accommodations.

When English Language Learners are misplaced into special education, they often experience drops in academic performance and misplaced students also experience complications in social and emotional development. The inability to communicate inhibits English Language Learners from effectively maintaining relationships with English-speaking peers. One meta-analysis contends that overidentifying English Language Learners with a disability in the Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders category violates their right to learn in the least restrictive environment (Gage, Gersten, Sugai, & Newman-Gonchar, 2013). The isolation they experience from being placed in a special education classroom restricts the ability for peers to model appropriate social behaviors. Thus, English Language Learners in special education are often not as mature socially as their English-speaking peers. Along with the academic achievement gap, English Language Learners struggle with additional consequences of misidentification in special education, such as gaps in social development.

Lack of Support Services

In order to better understand the needs of English Language Learners, it is crucial to identify aspects of support services that may be lacking for English Language Learners. Support services include both adequately trained teachers and the need for appropriate assessments. With regard to teacher training, many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge or consistent practice of teaching second language development, especially to English Language Learners within a regular classroom. Also, many school districts do not have qualified personnel to provide suitable second language instruction because there is a lack of professional development in that field. One effective solution for school districts is to explore the option of using bilingual school psychologists to help with properly assessing English Language Learners for special education services (Olvera & Gomez-Cerrillo, 2011). Bilingual school psychologists can better address student needs and options while evaluating and before identifying the student as cognitively disabled, thus preventing the misplacement of a student into a restrictive learning environment (O’Byron & Rogers, 2010). Educators contend that the difficulties associated with learning “a second language often resemble learning disabilities, and personnel without adequate knowledge

of learning disabilities and second language acquisition might incorrectly attribute students' academic struggles" (Sanchez, et al., 2010, p. 17).

Some school districts do not have appropriate assessments for English Language Learners and the instruments that exist have limitations. One commonly used test is the Language Assessment Scales-Oral Espanol that assesses students for multiple characteristics including academic achievement; a weakness of this assessment is that it neglects linguistic nuances between English and Spanish. The scoring system also has weakness; students are scored into three categories—non-proficient Spanish speakers, limited Spanish speakers and proficient Spanish speakers and weighted by percentile. Students who score above the 50th percentile are considered capable enough to perform in the regular education classroom without additional language assistance or special program placement. This categorization puts limitations on the ability to provide effective resources because it does not take individual language differences into consideration. In addition to a lack of proper identification, the Language Assessment Scales-Oral Espanol has limitations in accurately sorting English Language Learners based on their individual linguistic needs (Macswan & Rolstad, 2006). Because there is no standardized classification spectrum for English Language Learners, students can be inappropriately defined and classified based on the arbitrary categories.

Best Practices

In order to help English Language Learners achieve their actual potential, it is essential to evaluate the best practices for testing and assessment. Currently, there is no national standardized method for assessing language proficiency in English Language Learning students. School districts utilize a variety of language proficiency tests and 13 states encourage the use of an oral native language assessment along with the English examination (Macswan & Rolstad, 2006). English Language Learners also struggle on everyday classroom tasks that require a high level of proficiency in the English language. Most of the time these students do not have effective language supports to ease the test-taking process, such as an English-Spanish glossary with common vocabulary words (Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011). When faced with linguistically demanding test items, such as problem solving tasks, English Language Learners have a difficult time because the focus relies on English language comprehension first rather than the content-related task.

There are multiple test accommodations that have proved successful in assisting English Language Learners and provided better practices in core content-specific areas. One example of a mathematics-specific assessment instrument that utilized effective testing accommodations for English Language Learners is the KeyMath-3 assessment (Alt et al., 2013). The mathematics-focused assessment implemented the use of language translation of test items to better determine ELL's mathematical knowledge. The research team translated test items into Spanish. During the examination, when a student incorrectly answers a KeyMath-3 question in English, the test item is re-administered in Spanish. Thus, the researchers can determine if the student does not understand the mathematical concept, or if the student's response reflects a problem with English language comprehension. As a result of this modification, there was a significant improvement in students' test scores. Researchers concluded that an English-only administration of the exam would not provide accurate evidence of English Language Learners' mathematical skills and that

Spanish version is an appropriate accommodation for ELL students participating in high-stakes mathematics assessments (Alt et al., 2013).

Studies suggest incorporating additional supports that more accurately assist English Language Learners with regard to their specific classroom needs. One way to combat this overrepresentation of English Language Learners in special education is to hire a consultant to help referral team members more clearly define the difference between second language development and learning disability. The consultant is able to collaborate with teachers and administrators to provide neutral advice for placing a student in special education (Sanchez et al., 2010).

Early Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies also show promise in providing English Language Learners with improved early language development. Research indicates that when schools administer early phonological awareness strategies in the student's native language, such as Spanish word recognition and fluency assessments, this type of RTI is a better predictor of future performance in English literacy (Vanderwood, 2008). The improvement can be attributed to the fact that phonological awareness is not a language-specific skill. English Language Learners can apply these skills when they begin reading in English. The interventions identify students who are at risk for reading disabilities, but results show that this type of instruction help these ELL students "make substantial gains in reading" (Vanderwood, 2008, p. 1851).

Similarly, results from small-group reading interventions also see significant gains in both English and Spanish literacy performance among English Language Learners. One example of an effective intervention is Read Naturally, which is a daily, small reading group that focuses on repeated reading and progress monitoring. For the sake of making the intervention equitable for English Language Learners, the intervention materials are translated into Spanish. The daily repetitions of reading and frequent progress monitoring associated with this Response to Intervention technique help English Language Learners make considerable gains in oral fluency and literacy (Vanderwood, 2008). Consequently, districts that adopt an early literacy intervention can expect to increase early language development and reduce the number of students chosen for referral (Sanchez et al., 2010).

Conclusions and Future Study

In order to serve English Language Learning students more appropriately, it is crucial to acknowledge the growing achievement gap between English Language Learners and their non-ELL peers. By addressing English Language Learners' specific linguistic needs, it is possible to reduce this gap in achievement and provide the best practice to assist English Language Learning students achieve to their ability. Rather than testing English Language Learners' cognitive ability based on their language proficiency level, assessments should first be adapted to more accurately provide individualized linguistic support. This means that support, including appropriate language and core content testing, should be implemented before a student is evaluated and placed in special education. By tackling the misdiagnosis before the placement into special education, ELL students can receive more suitable support to help them achieve their academic goals.

Schools must create support tools and utilize language resources to help teachers better provide for their linguistically diverse student population. School districts should observe the needs of the language learning population and stress the importance of early intervention

strategies. Research indicates that early and frequent interventions can improve English Language Learners' performance. Districts need to more closely observe the definition of ability differences in the classroom to better classify their students with special needs (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). On the other hand, once a student has been referred and classified as a student with a learning disability related to language, that student should receive services befitting of their linguistic needs. It is true that "high-quality, effective instruction for all students in both general and special education could diminish the significance of overrepresentation" (Wolf et al., 2008).

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