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Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners With Learning Disabilities in the General Curriculum

To be academically successful in general education classrooms, English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities (LD) need instruction that is simultaneously responsive to their disability, English language status, and culture. Because the majority of students with LD have reading disabilities, ESL and classroom teachers must be familiar with instructional strategies that will support language and literacy development in the content areas. This article provides an overview of instructional character-

istics of ELLs with LD, and offers a framework for instructional planning and collaboration between content area, ESL, and special education teachers to ensure that students can be successful in the general education curriculum.

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MRS. JACKSON'S 8TH GRADE U.S. History class includes eight students who receive special education services for learning disabilities (LD), of whom three (Osvaldo, Ana, and Misha) are also English language learners (ELLs). Osvaldo and Ana receive English as a second language (ESL) instruction, but Misha was exited from the ESL program at the end of last year. This year, Mrs. Jackson's students are from several language groups, including Arabic, Farsi, Russian, and Spanish. In this group,

Kamal, recently arrived from Egypt, seems to be struggling to keep up, and she wonders if he might have an LD. Because she doesn't feel qualified to make such a judgment, she makes a mental note to speak with the ESL and special education teachers about him. Uncertain about how to best meet the needs of all groups, she hopes that consulting with these teachers will ultimately improve the students' performance on the spring assessments.

Mrs. Jackson's dilemma is shared by many educators in U.S. public schools today: With the emphasis on accountability for all groups of students (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001), and on providing students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004), general education teachers are increasingly expected to teach students with very diverse learning needs, and to prepare them for success on high-stakes assessments. Because most ELLs and students with disabilities are held to the same academic standards and take the same statewide assessments as all other students, there is an increased urgency to bring their performance up to levels comparable to their peers' (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

What does this mean for secondary teachers? By the time students reach middle school, students must possess proficient reading skills, as the focus of instruction, including in English/Language Arts, has long shifted to reading to learn (Harvey, 1998). Consequently, secondary teachers are generally unfamiliar with strategies to scaffold reading. Today's secondary classrooms present a different reality, however: Teachers must know how to teach grade-level content to students who are reading below grade level, and must be able to adapt materials as well as teaching approaches so that students with a wide range of sociocultural, linguistic, and [dis]ability-related characteristics have meaningful access to the general education curriculum. This task becomes even more complex when teaching students with LD who are also ELLs; without adequate preparation in the areas of special education, bilingual education, and ESL instruction, teachers struggle to fully understand

the nature and range of challenges experienced by students with disabilities who are learning in their second language (Klingner, Hoover, & Baca, 2008).

To be meaningful and comprehensible, instruction for ELLs with LD must be culturally and linguistically relevant, and also responsive to their disability (García & Ortiz, 2008). Because ELLs with LD are taught by content area, ESL, and special education teachers, their learning experience can become fragmented because few teachers are certified and fully qualified to address all three areas. Working together offers teachers an efficient and effective means of bridging knowledge gaps, and provides a more coherent instructional experience for students.

In this article, we discuss the complex interface between LD, second language learning, and culture, as well as the resultant barriers to learning experienced by ELLs with LD in content-area classes taught in English. We focus specifically on LD in view of the fact that approximately 50% of all students between the ages of 6 and 21 with identified disabilities are served in this category (U.S. Department of Education, 2005); for close to 80% of this group, the area of need is reading (International Dyslexia Association, 2007). We conclude with implications for adapting instruction to support these students' performance in the general education curriculum.

The Interface Between Disability, Language, and Culture for ELLs With LD

When ELLs struggle academically, many teachers, like Mrs. Jackson, wonder if this is due to the students' ELL status, a potential learning disability, or both (Klingner & Harry, 2006). For students who have been exited from the ESL program, teachers may even assume that limited English proficiency is no longer a factor in the students' academic difficulties (Tyler, 2006). Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to acknowledge that accurate and valid identification of LD among ELLs remains a challenge;

clearly, this is a multifaceted problem requiring a multidimensional, systemic solution (García & Ortiz, 2008). Although many ELLs have been misidentified, some ELLs struggle academically for reasons beyond second language status, socio-cultural backgrounds, and educational history, even when compared to their ELL peers. It is this group of learners that is our focus here because interventions typically implemented in general, ESL, and special education instruction fail to adequately account for all their learning needs. Although separated for discussion below, cultural, linguistic and [dis]ability characteristics are integrally intertwined; this interface requires careful attention when planning instruction.

Characteristics Associated With LD

According to IDEA (2004), a specific learning disability is:

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. (20 USC 104, section 602 (30) (A))

Students with LD are a heterogeneous group, and specific difficulties experienced by individual students will vary. In general, however, students with reading-related LD struggle to decode text due to difficulties with letter recognition and letter-sound correspondence, and demonstrate an “overreliance on whole-word, phonological, and contextual reading strategies” (Salend, 2008, p. 68). Their reading tends to be slow, choppy, and dysfluent; and they demonstrate below grade-level skills in vocabulary and comprehension (Hock et al., 2009). In addition, learning disabilities may be expressed in the areas of working memory and retention, and information processing; adolescents who struggle to read have also been described as *inactive*, as lacking self-monitoring skills, and as inefficient users of strategies they have been taught (Shippen, Houchins, Steventon, & Sartor, 2005).

Although limited in scope, available research suggests that ELLs identified as having reading disabilities demonstrate many of the same difficulties as native English speakers with LD (August & Shanahan, 2006; Tyler, 2006), and will experience these difficulties in their native language, not just in English (Ortiz, 1997). Due to the dual effects of their second language learner status and disability, ELLs with LD learning to read in English face different challenges in mastering elements that are critical to successful comprehension of text for any student, such as fluent, automatic decoding, and a rich vocabulary (Klingner et al., 2008). For ELLs, oral language development and motivation have also been identified (August & Shanahan, 2006) as important areas of consideration.

Because difficulties experienced by ELLs functioning in English can mimic characteristics of LD (Salend, 2008), and thereby lead to misidentification, Mrs. Jackson’s reluctance to assume that Kamal’s difficulties are due to a disability is well-justified. Unfamiliar with his home language, and lacking access to his school records from Egypt, she cannot ascertain the underlying reasons for his academic difficulties and frustration with assignments. However, by systematically incorporating ESL strategies and providing background information, Mrs. Jackson could minimize the impact of his limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with concepts related to U.S. history on his learning. If his progress is also affected by an undiagnosed disability, it is likely that he struggled in these areas in Arabic as well.

Learning in a Second Language

Adolescent ELLs are a heterogeneous group who present a wide range of oral and written language proficiencies in their native languages and in English (Rance-Roney, 2009). For ELLs with LD being taught academic content in English, teachers must consider the interaction between second language learning and LD (Klingner et al., 2008). These students are likely to have struggled with reading in their first language; now they must not only learn the discrete skills

associated with English proficiency (i.e., syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation), but must be able to use their English in culturally specific ways valued at school (Meier, 2003). Typically, these pragmatic aspects of language use are reflected not only in academic criteria related to oral and written expression, but also in norms for classroom interaction and behavior. In addition, their LD is likely to increase the cognitive demands of a lesson, thereby interfering with attention to the concepts being taught. Depending on the specific areas of reading affected by their disability, they may also experience greater difficulty with decoding new vocabulary, visual or auditory processing, retaining new information, and/or organizing ideas. At minimum, it is important for teachers to know that ELLs, including those with LD, may have been prematurely exited from bilingual education or ESL instruction prior to becoming proficient users of academic English such as that found in secondary textbooks and classroom materials (August & Shanahan, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Tyler, 2006).

The Cultural Context of Teaching and Learning

Because ELLs with LD (and their families) are members of nondominant sociocultural and/or linguistic communities, they enter school with worldviews that may vary considerably from those represented at school (Hollins, 2008). Their cultural orientations are evident in their academic performance as well as behavior, including ways in which they process information, use logic (e.g., spiral vs. linear), interact with others (e.g., collectivistic vs. individualistic), communicate (e.g., high vs. low context, indirect vs. direct), and learn (e.g., holistic vs. analytical) (Hollins, 2008; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). From a sociocultural perspective, math, science, literacy, and other forms of knowledge can be understood as cultural tools for thinking and learning (Rogoff, 2003). Consequently, how these subjects are taught at school, as well as the tools used to teach them (e.g., using an abacus vs. a calculator), will most likely reflect mainstream society's representation

of these subjects. It is, therefore, important for teachers to realize that their instruction is as much influenced by culture as is student learning, and that principles of good teaching cannot be assumed to be universalistic (Trumbull et al., 2001).

Equally important, students from nondominant racial/ethnic and sociocultural communities may find aspects of the curriculum less relevant to their personal life experiences and backgrounds, and may also experience isolation as a result of their status as perceived outsiders; ELLs with LD may face further rejection due to the stigma associated with disabilities (Artiles, 2003). For them, as well as for students with disabilities in general, portrayals of people with disabilities and/or people from their communities (or lack thereof) in school materials and activities may comprise a hidden curriculum that contributes to students' isolation, rejection, and/or alienation, with negative consequences for their learning and social-emotional well-being (Hollins, 2008; Safe Schools Coalition, 2005).

Mediating Instruction to Support Learning for ELLs With LD

Systematic consideration of these three areas can assist teachers in anticipating and preparing for potential breakdowns in the teaching–learning process that can result from a mismatch between students' educational needs and instruction. In this section, we offer a framework for adapting instruction for ELLs with LD; other students who are performing below grade level may also benefit from the ideas presented here. Although similar to what teachers may already be doing, it is important to use the process systematically for individual students.

Identifying Instructional Barriers to Learning

Once teachers have identified desired learning outcomes and decided upon the means that will be employed to evaluate this learning, the process of identifying potential barriers to both learning and valid assessment begins. Specifically,

the teacher must review the lesson content and instructional approaches to identify the cognitive and linguistic demands that will be placed on ELLs with LD as well as ways in which the lesson will (or will not) increase their motivation to engage with the content. For example, the high frequency of technical vocabulary and complex concepts in secondary grades can pose significant challenges for ELLs with LD at many levels (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Equally, the specific content, texts, and strategies may not engage them effectively in the learning process. Similarly, typical methods of assessment (e.g., exam questions with complex text to process, or responses requiring original prose) can quickly become tests of English proficiency rather than academic achievement, and thus fail to provide a true measure of students' learning. Potential barriers to consider include:

- The reading levels within and across texts and other materials, which may interfere with understanding of, or attention to, the concepts being taught;
- Words and concepts that will be unfamiliar to ELLs even though they are basic for native English speakers, including those with LD;
- Aspects of the lesson that require ELLs to learn academic concepts and English terminology simultaneously, doubling cognitive demands;
- The specific forms of oral, written, verbal, and nonverbal expression required for school success, that are socio-culturally unfamiliar to students; and
- Forms of bias in the portrayal of people from diverse groups, including but not limited to racism, classism, ableism, and sexism.

Adaptations to Support Learning for all Students

The above analysis can help teachers select adaptations that will support learning and engage ELLs with LD without watering down key concepts they need to learn, as well as allow them to better demonstrate their learning. Adaptations mediate cognitive and linguistic difficulties,

as well as cultural or linguistic discontinuities, through the use of a variety of instructional scaffolds to reduce frustration, not only for ELLs with LD but for other groups of struggling learners, as well (August et al., 2005; Echevarria & Graves, 2007; Fang, 2006; Freeman & Crawford, 2008; Hart, 2009; Santamaria, Fletcher, & Bos, 2002; Szpara & Ahmad, 2007).

Strategies that support students' cognitive and academic development include:

- Using teaching methods that draw on students' preferred or stronger modalities (e.g., listening vs. reading, oral vs. written);
- Reducing information students must generate independently (e.g., providing checklists, reading and/or study guides, peer assistance with note-taking); and
- Teaching study skills, self-monitoring skills, or other coping strategies to support areas affected by the disability.

In the areas of language and literacy development, approaches such as Sheltered English instruction (Echevarria & Graves, 2007) that support language acquisition during content instruction are particularly helpful for ELLs with LD. In addition, teachers should consider:

- Teacher-directed mini-lessons to review/reinforce word meaning;
- Modifying test formats to accommodate language and disability-related needs (e.g., reading questions to the student, allowing extra time, performance-based assessments);
- Teaching students discipline-specific language and symbols, as well as strategies to comprehend technical language and increase engagement with texts (e.g., paraphrasing, interpretation of noun phrases);
- Providing opportunities for oral language development (e.g., group activities, interactions with peers and native English speakers); and
- Supplementary, intensive reading interventions provided by a reading specialist or special education teacher who is familiar with ESL adaptations.

Mrs. Jackson decided to try a variety of approaches. She developed chapter outlines and study guides to reduce the information that ELLs and students with LD would otherwise have to generate as she lectured. She also began to preview lessons in her (albeit) limited Spanish to reduce the amount of new information in English for her Spanish-speaking ELLs, and used simpler language, reiteration, slower speech, and visuals whenever practical to explain new technical vocabulary. Supplementing the textbook with audio-taped recordings, DVDs, and/or Internet-based accounts of the lesson content proved to be quite effective, particularly for Osvaldo, whose reading in both languages was well below grade level. Less frustrated by difficulties with decoding complex texts, Osvaldo and other ELLs also appeared to be more motivated to engage in learning.

Additionally, teachers must find ways to embed new learning in tasks that connect content to their students' lives, and, finally, create access to resources in students' native languages to support learning in English. The use of materials, textbooks, and language that present a strengths-based view of diversity, and that are free from bias, is also important in view of the alarming degree of alienation, bullying, or harassment reported by middle and high school students as a result of their actual or perceived characteristics, including race/ethnicity, language status, and disability (Safe Schools Coalition, 2005). Mrs. Jackson sought ways to link her lessons to events in her immigrant students' countries of origin, and/or connect U.S. events with aspects of their personal and socio-cultural experiences. With the help of some of the parents at the school, she was also able to contact community volunteers about tutoring Kamal and Misha in their native languages.

Coordinating Instruction Across Teachers and Programs

The complexity of meeting the educational needs of ELLs with LD, and the potential for discontinuity in the instructional process, require that effective communication and collaboration

across teachers and programs be a priority. Because participation in the general education curriculum requires skills that are also the focus of instruction from ESL and special education teachers, collaboration should focus on (a) identifying specific content and/or skills that can be taught or reinforced by ESL and/or special education teachers; (b) ensuring that instruction in these concepts/skills will be consistent across teachers and programs; and (c) preventing gaps, redundancies, and/or conflicts.

When Mrs. Jackson approached Ms. Hudson and Mrs. Ivey, the ESL and special education teachers, they agreed that some of the students would benefit from explicit instruction on strategies to navigate the more technical language of history, math, and science. Because Osvaldo struggled with decoding text, even in comparison to his ELL peers, the team agreed that Mrs. Ivey would focus her resource reading instruction on decoding, along with reinforcing content-specific vocabulary and spelling. Ms. Hudson would introduce story mapping during her ESL period as a way to teach all her ELL students how to organize information in a linear sequence—a style that they would be expected to demonstrate in oral and written assignments. Although the teachers found it challenging to find time to coordinate their efforts, they recognized the importance of making instruction coherent and consistent across disciplines, teachers, and settings.

Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a framework for understanding students' educational needs based on their language, disability, and culture, and for identifying effective ways to mediate instruction for academic success. This requires, however, that teachers, themselves, receive the support of school districts and administrators, and that they are provided the tools, time, and resources to collaborate in planning and delivering instruction. Although federal laws and state and local policies can hold schools accountable for the success of all students, achieving the desired

results requires a significant shift in our thinking from expecting children to enter school ready to learn in the ways that schools have traditionally taught, to ensuring that the educational system at large is ready to educate, and that teachers are supported in their efforts to ensure that no child is left behind.

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