Is it a language struggle or a disability?

SOLANGE LOPES MURPHY, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Dept. Special Ed., Language, & Literacy
The College of New Jersey
murphys@tcnj.edu
Lack of qualified personnel to work effectively with ELs (Ferlis & Xu, 2016; Garrett & Holcomb, 2005; Perez & Morrison, 2016; Sanchez, 2017) & teacher preparation programs are not equipping teacher candidates adequately in ESL instruction (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014).
PURPOSE OF STUDY

• Explore whether school professionals could correctly identify four ELs’ classroom behaviors as being characteristic of students learning English, rather than indicators of a learning disability, and

• Examine the extent to which correct assessment of these behaviors was related to classroom teaching experience & training in ESL and SPED.
Participants

- 330 school professionals
  - General education
  - Special education
  - ESL
  - Non-instructional
  - Administrators
- 10 schools (elementary & secondary)
- 10 districts in the Northeast U.S.
# The Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observable Behaviors</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to follow directions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of appropriate behavior in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of attention when instruction is being delivered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other: <em>(Please explain the behavior)</em></td>
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Findings

Teaching Experience: 12 years
SPED Training: 62%
ESL Training: 39%
Major Finding

"Less than 1/3 of the participants correctly indicated that none of the four behaviors allows one to conclude that an EL has a learning disability"
Factors that Make ELs Vulnerable

External Factors

- Quality of Education
- Assessments Used
- Cultural Insensitivity
- Low Expectations
- Disability
- Level of Literacy in L1
- Sociocultural Context

ELs
Step 1. The Importance Of Knowing Who the Learner Is
Profile 1

- Have been in the country for less than 5 years.
- Have had an adequate degree of schooling in their native country.
- Perform in reading and writing at grade level.
- Find it relatively easy to catch up with their native-English-speaking peers.
- Have difficulty with standardized tests.

- Have parents who are educated speakers on their L1.
- Developed a strong foundation in their L1.
- Demonstrate the potential to make fast progress in English.
- Have found it easy to acquire a second or third language.
Profile 2

- Have **recently arrived** in an English-speaking school.
- Have experienced **interrupted schooling**.
- Have **limited native-language and literacy skills**.
- Perform **poorly** on achievement tasks.

- May **not** have had previous schooling.
- May experience feeling of **loss of emotional and social networks**.
- Have parents who have **low literacy levels** and could have difficulty learning English.
Profile 3

- Were born in the US but have grown up in households where a language other than English is spoken.
- Live in communities of speakers who primarily communicate in their L1 or go back and forth between languages.
- Have grown up being exposed to 2 languages simultaneously.

- May have **not** developed academic literacy in either L1 or L2.
- Often engage in extensive code-switching.
- Have acquired oral proficiency in a language other than English first but may not have learned to read or write in that language.
Profile 4

- Have already spent more than 5 years in an English-speaking school.
- Have literacy skills that are below grade level.

- Have had some English as a second language classes or bilingual support.
- Require substantial and ongoing language and literacy support.
In addition to what language is spoken at home, it is critical for all professionals to find out...

- The circumstances that brought the family to the U.S.
- How much prior schooling the child has had.
- When they came to the U.S.
- Whether parents speak English.
- What is the education level of their parents.
- The child’s behavior at home & how that compares to the behavior of siblings.
Important to Know

- A true language disorder is evident in every language the child speaks.

- To separate a language struggle from a disability, it is critical that all professionals (instructional and non-instructional) work collaboratively to determine whether the child indeed has a disability and needs special education services.

- It is relatively common for multilingual children to be misdiagnosed with a disability when they are only demonstrating a language difference.
  - *Language difference would involve sentence structure, speech sound production, vocabulary, comprehension, and the pragmatic use of the language.*
Step 2.
Conduct assessment of instructional context
English Language Observation Form

- NJ DOE - to verify if student(s) can successfully achieve in classrooms where language of instruction is English.

Student Behaviors to be Observed
- Listens and follows along
- Responds to teacher questions
- Interprets oral information to complete content-related tasks
- Responds to unexpected/spontaneous questions appropriately
- Asks for clarification if necessary
- Provides clarification if necessary
- Clears up misunderstanding
- Uses mostly words/phrases, sentences, or connected sentences
Version 1: Read the text and explain in which government telephone services grew the most. Provide examples.

- O telefone tornou-se um item essencial à qualidade de vida do cidadão. Antes considerado um bem de difícil acesso, após a privatização do setor sua disponibilidade cresceu vertiginosamente. A tabela abaixo resume os dados de crescimento no acesso a linhas telefônicas nos últimos governos.

  Fonte: Dados oficiais do IBGE
  De 1994 a 2002 (FHC) cresceu 224,21% ou 15,84% ao ano.
  De 2002 a 2009 (Lula) cresceu 37,82% ou 4,69% ao ano.
Version 2:
Comparar Dois Governos - Telefonia

Governo Fernando Henrique Cardoso
1994-2002

15,84% ao ano

Governo Lula
2002-2009

4,69% ao ano
English Language Observation Form

- Listen and follow along?
- Respond to teacher questions?
- Interpret oral information to complete content-related tasks?
- Respond to unexpected/spontaneous questions appropriately?
- Ask for clarification if necessary?
- Provide clarification if necessary?
- Clear up misunderstanding?
- Use mostly words/phrases, sentences, or connected sentences?
Does instruction emphasize a language development framework?

What is the discourse like?

What is the quality of interactions?

Is the content being made comprehensible?

Are instructions clear?

Is instruction sensitive to what ELs can do in English?
## Discourse

### Deficit-Oriented Phrases & Suggested Alternatives

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<th>Alternatives</th>
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<td>Does not</td>
<td>Can...but has not demonstrated ability to...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will not</td>
<td>Does...on a regular basis but does not do... on a regular basis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuses to/Chooses not to</td>
<td>Does...on a regular basis but does not do...on a regular basis.</td>
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<td>Unmotivated</td>
<td>Does complete...tasks but does not complete...tasks on a regular basis.</td>
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<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Does engage in...tasks but does not engage in...tasks.</td>
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**Mindset, Behaviors, Expectations, etc.**
Step 3. Characteristics of language acquisition that mirrors learning disability
### Characteristics of Learning Disabilities & 2nd Language Acquisition

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<td>Difficulty distinguishing auditorily between unfamiliar sounds not in one’s 1st language. Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in L1.</td>
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<td>Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence (may know one day but not the next).</td>
<td>Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings are not understood.</td>
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(Klingner & Eppolito, 2014, p.15)
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<td>May have poor auditory memory.</td>
<td>May seem to have poor auditory memory if sounds are unfamiliar or not well understood.</td>
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<td>May seem \textit{easily frustrated} and/or discouraged.</td>
<td>Learning in a second language can be \textit{frustrating}.</td>
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(Klingner & Eppolito, 2014, p.16)
Accurate, reliable, and sensitive assessment of Els is about asking the right questions about students & working in teams to think carefully about the students’ language proficiency, cultural & family backgrounds, skills & cognitive backgrounds, and social, academic & behavioral strengths & needs.
Step 4. Understand second language development
Expression in a Second Language,

Non Verbal Response  Gradually Verbal

Through lots of:
  - Linguistic supports
  - Visual supports
  - Interactive supports
  - Graphic supports
Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

- Language skills needed in social situations
  - *When they are on the playground, in the lunch room, on the school bus, at parties, playing sports and talking on the telephone, etc.*

- Communication occur in a meaningful social context

- Skills develop within **six months to two years** after immersion in the target culture
Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

- Refers to formal academic learning
- This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material
- This usually takes at least five years
- If a child has no prior schooling or has no support in native language development, it may take seven to ten years for them to catch up to their peers
We will **table** this discussion for now.
Branches of Government
Step 5. Exemplary practices for ELs
Strategies

- Slow speech and use shorter sentences, present tense of verbs, synonyms, examples, gestures, and demonstrations
- Avoid expressions or sayings that are only common in the US (e.g., *up in the air*, *hit the books*)
- Use as many mediums as possible to convey information (e.g., oral, written, videos, demonstration)
- Give students enough time to process the question
- Use bilingual handouts and cue lists
- Get to know your students and their cultures
- Use metaphors and imagery for cues
Adopt a Language Development Framework
Look for

Find the differences.

Calculate

Find $x$.

Here it is.
Step 6.
Separating a language struggle from a disability
LANGUAGE STRUGGLE??

LEARNING DISABILITY??
Peer Analysis

- A peer analysis is critical in determining if the student’s performance is atypical.
- The ideal peer group are ELs, same language background, same time in program, same grade of entry in school, & similar profile.
Both language and disability-related needs must be met.
High Quality Instruction & Multiple Interventions

Assessment

Progress over Time
6 - 8 weeks

Learner

Instruction

Learning/Language Difficulty or Learning Disability?
Examining Sources of Difficulties: 

**Steps**

- Generate an inventory of specific observable behaviors
  
  1. Avoid broad statements
    
    ▶ *Example:* “The student has difficulty comprehending”, instead “When I read a story, the student has difficulty retelling the events of the story back in English.”

- Explain the observed behaviors
  
  2. Possible ELL Explanation
    
    ▶ *Example:* “The student may not understand because the language and cultural context of the story is unfamiliar to him/her.”

  3. Possible SPED Explanation
    
    ▶ *Example:* “The student may have difficulty understanding abstract vocabulary or may have limited memory capacity.”
Language & Disability Needs Framework

- More language-based instructional & assessment supports
- High English language needs
- Low disability-related needs
- Low English language needs
- High disability-related needs
- Fewer supports
- Needs may change over time
- More intensive language-and disability-related supports
- More supports that remove disability-related barriers
Dynamic Assessment: Narrative Language Samples

- Child tells a story from a short wordless picture book in L1 or L2
  - Good measure of an EL’s language strengths and weaknesses
  - Narrative development is a domain of language that children with specific learning disabilities have difficulty with
- Narrative is recorded and analyzed
- Interventions would be infused to increase the length and complexity of student’s narrative
- Evaluator would use engage the child in a second narrative language sample
- Observe amount of knowledge application & transfer from the interventions
Language Difficulty or Disability: Steps to Discern One from the Other

EL experiences difficulty in the classroom

**Step 1:** Teacher makes use of a variety of instructional strategies to address student’s difficulty & records student progress

4-6 weeks

**Step 2:** Teacher requests assistance from in-school problem-solving teams

With appropriate data collection

**Step 3:** In school problem-solving team develops an intervention plan & timeframe

**Step 4:** In school-team reevaluates intervention plan and assesses student progress over time

Student continues experiencing difficulty

Adapted from the VA DOE 2009
Language Difficulty or Disability: 
*Steps to Discern One from the Other*

EL continues to experience difficulty in the classroom

**Step 5a:** In school problem-solving team modifies or expands intervention plan & adjusts timeframe **OR**

**Step 5b:** In school problem-solving team requests dual language assessment

**Step 6:** Dual language assessment is conducted to determine appropriate action

Adapted from the VA DOE 2009
Pre-Referral Checklist for ELs

✓ Has the student received **appropriate core curriculum** instruction that is appropriate for EL students?

✓ Has the student received **intensive evidence-based interventions** in the area of academic weakness implemented with fidelity over time and demonstrated little or no progress?

✓ **Extrinsic factors** have been considered (Physical, personal, cultural, learning environment)?

✓ Has the team **consulted with the parent** regarding learning patterns and language use in the home?
Pre-Referral Checklist for ELs
Cont’d.

✓ Does the team **have data** to support that the difficulties (academic, social-emotional, or in speech & language) are most likely due to a disability versus a language difference (i.e., comparative data to like peers, etc.)?

✓ Are the **error patterns** seen in L1 similar to the patterns seen in L2?
Referral to special education may be appropriate

Referral to special education may not be appropriate
Please complete the sentences:

- I learned that...
- I still would like to know...