

Chapter 24

Teaching ELL Students in the Elementary Grades: Teaching ELL Students With Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents information regarding teaching ELL students with high incidence disabilities in the mild to moderate range. Specific disabilities to be discussed are learning disabilities, dyslexia, cognitive impairments, and autism. Identification procedures and implications for the individual education plan are offered. Learning characteristics that are manifested with these disabilities are explored. Instructional strategies that are most effective for children with these disabilities are explained. The impact of ELL on the disability is discussed. Accommodations to instructional strategies for ELL students are suggested. The misidentification of ELL students as having a disability is examined as well as misplacement into special education.

INTRODUCTION

Students who are English language learners (ELL) are frequently misdiagnosed with a disability because these two groups of students share similar learning characteristics such as the following: Both groups of students may have trouble with expressing their thoughts orally or in written form, following directions (oral and written), staying on task, comprehending subject content, and understanding written material. Although they share similar characteristics, the etiology of the problems differs significantly; and therefore, interventions and instruction should also be very different. Students with disabilities have difficulty learning due to the neurological nature of the disability. ELL students have difficulty learning because of language differences. This misunderstanding regarding the differences between these two groups of students frequently results in a misplacement (and labeling) of ELL students into special education classrooms. Unless ELL students also have a disability, this placement is completely inappropriate.

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The objectives for this chapter are as follows:

1. Distinguish between disability and difference,
2. Identify learning characteristics of specific high incidence disabilities,
3. Identify instructional strategies for ELL students with high incidence disabilities,
4. Identify specific accommodations for the Individual Education Plan.

BACKGROUND

The right to an education for ELL students continues to be questioned (Smith & Tyler, 2010) despite rulings from the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) that schools must offer services to children whose first language is not English. “Bilingual education has come under attack as opponents attempt to end the provision of these services. Some of the recent focus on illegal immigrants and undocumented workers is, unfortunately, reminiscent of the nativism movement that occurred at the beginning of the last century” (Smith & Tyler, 2010, p. 75). In addition to this controversy, many ELL students are misdiagnosed as having a disability, specifically learning disabilities, language disorders, or cognitive impairments (Smith & Tyler, 2010, p. 74-113).

All special education laws, beginning with the landmark legislation, Public Law (PL) 94-142 (EHA) passed in 1975, mandate that all students who are being evaluated for a disability be tested in their native language. Evaluation procedures for determining the existence of a disability are to be individual, non-discriminatory, multi-disciplinary, multi-source and administered by practitioners/clinicians who are certified in specific areas of assessment. Prior to 1975, all children referred to special education were evaluated in English which resulted in a significant number of ELL students being misidentified as having a disability. Evaluating students in their native language can be quite challenging due to the myriad of variations in regional dialects. It is difficult for districts to find examiners who are fluent in all of the languages and dialects that ELL students speak; therefore, misidentification remains a concern. ELL students are also “misdiagnosed as having learning or language impairments because of standardized tests that are not sensitive to language differences when impairments do not exist” (Mercer & Pullen, 2009, p. 219).

The current support (not mandate) for full inclusion of students with all disabilities in the regular/mainstream classroom has had a major impact on the education for ELL students. Full inclusion maintains that all students with disabilities within the full range of intensity (i.e., mild, moderate, severe, profound) learn best in the regular classroom with their normally developing peers. To support students with disabilities in this setting, a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) has been implemented in many school districts throughout the nation. MTSS is organized in three general tiers. All students receive instruction on Tier One using the general curriculum with quality instruction. Students who do not succeed on Tier One move to Tier Two to receive additional instruction in smaller groups several times per week. Students who do not achieve at this level move to Tier Three. At this level they receive individualized intensive daily instruction as well as that from Tiers One and Two. In many systems, if a student fails to achieve at Tier Three, he/she is referred to special education. MTSS is also being used to instruct ELL students. (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016) “Students who are ELLS can benefit greatly from an MTSS, but additional considerations are needed to ensure that the practices take into account their learning needs. Some research shows that tiered supports can be effective for ELLS, but few states have

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