# Essential Components of Special Education for English Language Learners With Learning Disabilities

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A seamless, supportive education for English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities (LD) includes many essential components. When ELLs are identified as having LD, their need for instruction in English language development does not end (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014; Zehler et al., 2003), nor do the benefits of instruction in their home language cease. In other words, ELLs with LD need the services designed to support both students with LD and ELLs. These learners benefit from (a) culturally and linguistically responsive teachers; (b) culturally and linguistically responsive and relevant instruction; (c) a supportive learning environment; (d) assistance with English language acquisition (such as oral language, vocabulary, and academic language development) and support with the home language; (e) help in the general education classroom with accessing the general education curriculum; and (f) intensive, research-based interventions designed to help improve academic and, possibly, behavioral skills in targeted areas.

## Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teachers

Whether in the general or special education classroom, teachers who are responsive to their students' cultural and linguistic needs share many features (Huerta, 2011; Kea & Trent, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalex, 2008; Nieto, 2003). These teachers build strong relationships with students and their families. They hold high expectations and know how to scaffold instruction to help students meet those

expectations. They do not give up. When a student does not succeed, rather than conclude the student cannot be successful, they try a different approach. They connect learning with students' experiences and interests, making learning relevant to students' lives, and they value and build on different ways of knowing. These responsive teachers also help students to develop a critical consciousness so that they can be aware of and challenge society's inequities (Kea & Trent, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Linguistically responsive teachers understand the second language acquisition process and know how to support ELLs' growth in language and literacy (Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014). They view bilingualism as an asset. They understand how learning to read in a second or additional language is similar to and different from learning to read in a first language, how to differentiate instruction to meet diverse students' needs, how culture affects learning, and how to use assessment procedures that are sensitive to cultural differences and provide an accurate portrayal of students' strengths as well as their learning needs (Ortiz, & Artiles, 2010; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2008).

## Culturally and Linguistically Responsive and Relevant Instruction

Culturally responsive instruction (Gay, 2002; Kea & Trent, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2001) emphasizes relevance to students' lives and builds on their prior knowledge, interests, and motivation. It includes the explicit teaching of school-expected norms for

participation while validating the interactional and communicative styles that students have learned in their homes and communities (Rodriguez, Ringler, O'Neal, & Bunn, 2009). It creates literacy activities that build on and expand students' home literacy experiences such as storytelling, writing autobiographies and personal narratives, or writing letters to family members. It incorporates students' and their families' knowledge and expertise into instruction (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Murry, 2012).

Linguistically responsive instruction (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonazalez, 2008) is understandable (i.e., comprehensible) for ELLs and appropriate for their language proficiency levels. It includes language objectives and language supports and develops linguistic competence through purposeful classroom dialogue and frequent opportunities to learn and use academic language. It includes explicit attention to linguistic forms and functions.

## A Supportive Learning Environment

A supportive environment facilitates learning and promotes positive school experiences. Students feel safe and are comfortable taking risks. They need not fear that their efforts at communication will be thwarted. Students frequently collaborate with one another in mutually beneficial ways. They can be active learners and feel competent and successful. It is important to keep in mind that ELLs with LD can appear to be competent in one context but not another (Harry & Klingner, 2006) and can seem very different across dissimilar educational settings (López-Reyna, 1996). Therefore, it is imperative to examine all learning environments to make sure that students are thriving and are receiving the support they need (Herrera, Perez, Escamilla, 2010).

## Assistance With English Language Acquisition

Regardless of the setting, ELLs require explicit instruction that supports their oral language, vocabulary, and academic language development (August & Shanahan, 2006; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Gersten, & Baker 2000;

Goldenberg, 2008; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009). Teachers must create learning situations where students can interact with peers in meaningful ways. Effective vocabulary instruction for ELLs must be frequent, intensive, systematic, and complex and should include strategy instruction that helps students learn words independently (Klingner, 2012).

## Support in General Education Classrooms

Like other students with LD, ELLs with LD are entitled to support that helps them access the general education curriculum (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006). These supports include modifications and adaptations recommended for ELLs (e.g., Sheltered English techniques) as well as accommodations for students with disabilities. Garcia and Tyler (2010) suggest that teachers first identify common barriers to learning for their ELLs with LD, and then implement strategies that have been shown to be effective with similar students. Possibilities include providing extra time to complete tasks, clarifying complex directions, providing visual supports, recording reading assignments for homework or review, providing peer tutoring, and breaking longer presentations into shorter segments.

## Intensive Research-Based Interventions

Last but certainly not least, ELLs with LD must receive intensive research-based interventions designed to help them improve their academic and, as needed, their behavioral skills in targeted areas. Some consider these individualized, intensive interventions to be the "hallmark" of special education (Vaughn, Denton, & Fletcher, 2010). For ELLs, the language of intervention should match the language of classroom reading instruction (Ortiz, 2001). Interventions should be designed specifically for and validated with ELLs who struggle with reading. In other words, interventions that have only been shown to be effective for monolingual speakers are inadequate. Vaughn and colleagues (e.g., Vaughn, Cirino et al., 2006;

Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005; Vaughn, Mathes et al., 2006) included the following elements in their interventions for ELLs:

- Explicit instruction in oral language and listening comprehension,

- Explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies,

- A read-aloud routine with explicit vocabulary instruction and scaffolded story retelling,

- Word study and phonics strategies,

- Word reading and reading connected texts, and

- Repeated reading for speed, accuracy, fluency and prosody.

## Conclusion

Providing special education for ELLs with LD will require collaboration among the various teachers and support personnel in a school. For example, special education teachers who are unfamiliar with the process of second language acquisition and sheltering techniques should collaborate with colleagues who have preparation in teaching English as a Second Language, content-area teachers who are endorsed as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, or both. Similarly, teachers working with ELLs can seek advice from their special education colleagues. Together we share more expertise than any one of us alone.

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