

# Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice

## Authors

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## Description

This 62-page review identifies key principles in identifying and supporting English language learners with learning disabilities and provides an overview of guidelines that are used by those states in the United States with the largest populations of English language learners.

## Salient Points

Identifying whether an English language learner is experiencing academic difficulty because of a learning disability, because of difficulties acquiring the second language, or because of other factors (socio-economic status, first language development, etc.) is challenging but necessary if learners are to access the help that they need. This document reviewed guidelines that are commonly used in 20 states in the US to identify and assist English learners with learning disabilities.

The review identified key questions to explore when determining the source of a language learner's academic difficulties. These questions address the quality of education the learner is receiving; how the learner's progress compares with the "normal" rate of progress of those of similar ages and language proficiency; what is considered "normal" within the child's cultural background; and what additional factors (socio-economic factors, previous education, first language fluency, etc.) may affect academic progress.

The review concluded that standardized tests, on their own, cannot adequately distinguish between learning disabilities and second language proficiency, limited previous schooling, and low first language proficiency. As a result, providing professional development for educators, implementing pre-referral strategies, involving parents, using multiple forms of data, and developing clear policies were highlighted as important.

## Questions for Reflection

As you explore this document, consider the following questions:

- The review focuses primarily on younger learners. Which of the strategies for identifying and supporting learners with learning disabilities might apply to an adult ESL context?

- How do you distinguish between learners who have difficulty in your class because of lower language proficiency, and learners who have difficulty because of learning disabilities? Does your teaching context have procedures for identifying whether English language learners have a learning disability?
- This framework described principles and practices for identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities. Does your teaching context have a procedure that helps you and other teachers identify learners with learning disabilities? Have you used this procedure to support your learners?
- On page 7, this document suggests that professional development is needed for educators who are supporting English learners with potential learning disabilities. Have you received professional development in any of the topics listed on that page?

## **Keywords**

*Misidentified, mismatching, second language acquisition*

## **Reference and Links**

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