English Language Learners (ELL) Does Not Equal Special Education

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight the challenges faced by schools when addressing a wide range of learning needs—specifically English language learners (ELL) and students with exceptionalities. Both populations of students have a history of being isolated rather than included with same-aged peers due to non-traditional learning profiles. Many educators are overwhelmed with the idea of providing services to diverse learners and have limited knowledge of ways to include all learners with brain-based research practices. Both ELLs and students with exceptionalities can benefit from teaching that promotes learning that lends itself to utilizing the whole brain and triggering transfer of knowledge from short-term to long-term memory. This article highlights the issues faced by ELL educators, special educators, and classroom teachers and provides concrete teaching strategies that support and include all learners.

Keywords: English Language Learner (ELL), special education, brain research, language, inclusionary practices

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER (ELL) DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Public school education and educators are consistently in the spotlight. With a significant emphasis being placed on high stakes testing scores and graduation rates, the need for understanding how to teach all learners is increasingly important. Tarbutton (2018) emphasizes the importance of providing a more diverse classroom to increase student success, specifically important is student-centered learning, integrating technology, and setting high expectations for all learners. The pressures of today's society have also placed a great deal of pressure on teachers to address the emotional and social aspects of learning (Burke Harris, 2019). Transfer, "the ability to learn in one situation and then use that learning, possibly in a modified or generalized form, in another situation" (Sousa, 2017, p. 153), has long been recognized as fundamental in brain research, but are educators placing enough emphasis on its relevance for student learning? This article focuses on two specific groups of learners who are being identified more frequently in our public schools: English Language Learners (ELL) and students with special education needs.

According to the United States Department of Education (2018), an ELL is identified as, "A national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient. This term is often preferred over limited-English-proficient (LEP) as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits" (p.1). Dual language proficiency or progress towards proficiency should be seen as a strength instead of a weakness, yet researchers have found that ELL students' sense of belonging in school is directly connected to their perceptions of how they are viewed by peers, teachers, and administrators (Harklau, 2000). Shapiro (2014) documented how students engaged in public protest over what they experienced as deficit discourse at school and in the community.

Special education is a broad umbrella including students with specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia), emotional disabilities, hearing and vision impairments, autism, and more severe cognitive delays (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018). When considering neuroscience research, one must consider that the brain of students with disabilities processes

information differently and teaching practices must take this into account (Butrymowics &

Mader, 2018).

Although the United States has come a long way since the passing of the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, students identified with special education needs

continue to struggle in public schools and beyond. In 1997, the reauthorization of IDEA set the

stage for schools: " . . . lawmakers made their intent clear: Students are presumed to be

educated in a general education class unless their disability prevents that" (Constantinescu &

Samuels, 2016, p.10). The law supports special education students to be placed in the least

restricted environment (LRE), and it is estimated that 90% of students should be able to

graduate from high school meeting the same standards as general education students

(Butrymowics & Mader, 2018); and yet students in special education are less likely to go to and

complete college and earn nearly four dollars less per hour than former general education

students in the workforce (Sanford et al., 2011).

Most schools continue to struggle with what is best for all students when it comes to

addressing unique learning and behavioral needs. Zhao (2009) explains, "All children should be

accepted and be provided with equal opportunity to help realize their potential" (p. 47), but this

can be a difficult goal to achieve. It is time for the seven million students in special education to

be served with the same respect as those in general education, through innovative practices

that meet their unique learning needs. As regular education has embraced new ways of thinking

about neuroplasticity, such as growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, 2016) and other innovations,

special education has remained stagnantly focused on diagnostic categories and remedial and

corrective approaches (Armstrong, 2017).

<div align="center">**Inclusive Practices**</div>

Inclusive practices are one way to enrich the learning environment for all students. Aside

from helping challenged learners to rise to higher standards, the school culture can be positively

affected. A study conducted by the University of Kansas found of student experiences in

inclusive schools: "Many (also) pointed out the positive aspects of the arrangement, including being able to help their peers academically, receiving more help themselves, and learning to socialize with others different from themselves (The University of Kansas, 2016, para. 10). The research supports the idea that inclusion must be considered as a critical piece of building positive school experiences for all students.

This idea of inclusive practices does not extend only to special education students but to emergent bilinguals as well. In many US public schools, English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for accessing rigorous academic content (Shapiro, 2014). This belief that proficiency in English is required prior to accessing content knowledge has led to what Valdés (2001) refers to as linguistic isolation, which can lead to academic and linguistic stagnation (Callahan, 2005). Ultimately, the goal for all educators would be to include all students in the school learning community while simultaneously challenging them academically and socially. This could be achieved through continual collaboration among mainstream, ELL specialists, and special educators with students and parents/guardians.

English Language Learners (ELL) are among the fastest-growing population of students in America's public schools today (English Language Learners in Public Schools, 2019). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, an ELL who has been in the United States for less than one year will need to take standard assessments with their English-speaking peers, but the test scores will not count towards the school's rating. In the second year, the scores will be publicly reported, and by the third year in the country, all ELL's assessment results in both math and English will be treated like their native-born peers (Klein, 2019). Latino students now represent the second largest population of students within the United States with 26% of the population age five years or younger, as well as 23% of the population 18 years or younger being of Latino descent (Hemphill et al., 2011). Although improvements were seen in reading performance of Latino students between 1992 and 2009, the gap between Latino and White students has remained constant (McFarland, 2019, p.5). It is important for teachers to

understand the impact that development in a student's first language (L1) can have on their second language (L2) development.

Transfer

Researchers have been able to demonstrate that students are able to "transfer" language skills from their L1 into their L2, but this transfer does not occur automatically. According to Cummins' (1978) developmental interdependence hypothesis (DIH), a student's ability to develop competence in L2 depends on their competency in their L1 at the time of exposure to L2. Effectively, transfer will only occur if a child has had sufficient exposure to their L1 prior to exposure to L2. Building upon this idea, Cardenas-Hagan et al. (2007), determined that Spanish speaking students with a strong foundation in letter name and sound identification in their L1, performed better at transferring that recognition into English or L2. When looking at phonological awareness and oral language skills, it was suggested that providing explicit instruction in these foundational skills in a student's L1 could help the student transfer their reading skills in English (L2) (Cardenas-Hagan et al., 2007, p. 256).

Transfer is both essential for students to apply new learning and extremely challenging to achieve (Sousa, 2017). Failure of transfer can present in a number of ways, and it can be challenging for teachers to identify the root of the problem. When considering ELL students and students with learning disabilities, both profiles can share characteristics including weak oral language skills, poor motivation, and low self-esteem (Ortiz et al., 2006). These similarities can often lead to a disproportionately represented ELL population in special education programs (Linan-Thompson et al., 2006). While a student with a learning disability in reading may have difficulty with reading comprehension and literacy skills due to a language processing issue, ELLs can typically learn to read in their native language but lack exposure to spoken and written English, and that can adversely affect their development of English literacy skills (Perras, 2017). These differences require teachers to look deeper into the learning issues students present. Rather than focusing on deficits, teachers servicing students with language needs must be open

to new findings in the field of neuroscience. Brain research now suggests rather than working around areas of learning weaknesses, that educational practices aim to strengthen pathways to potentially change the brain processes of learners (Boaler & LaMar, 2019).

Ultimately, recommendations that are made for ELL students or students with special education needs (e.g., presentation of content in a variety of ways; engaging in multiple methods and media; avoiding disconnecting facts; and finding ways to connect learning) must be considered as best practices rather than specialized teaching approaches (Boaler & LaMar, 2019). Other brain researched teaching approaches to consider include: explicitly teaching content-specific vocabulary in context; using direct and explicit reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making predictions, monitoring and asking questions as they read, and summarizing after reading); increasing exposure to print resources including oral readings and discussion; and increasing focused academic discourse (Francis and Rivera, 2006). By refocusing efforts on teaching all students inclusively using effective classroom strategies, educators can finally help guide all learners to achieve academic success in America's public schools.

Emily Kapln (2019) describes six strategies for teaching ELL students gathered from interviewing experienced teachers of ELL students. They suggest that teachers should:

1. Cultivate relationships and be culturally responsive.

2. Teach language skills across the curriculum.

3. Emphasize productive language.

4. Speak slowly and increase wait time.

5. Differentiate—use multiple modalities.

6. Incorporate students' native languages and do not be afraid of using technology.

Utilization of these six strategies ultimately creates an environment that is conducive for supporting all learners across the spectrum in a culturally responsive way. By creating a space

that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing, Hammond (2015) argues students can relax and be more apt to learn, leading to better outcomes for all.

Conclusion

Creating a learning environment that is both emotionally and physically safe is probably more important than ever for the health of the overall child. Thankfully, the strategies included in this article are good for all students. Implementation of these and similar strategies is crucial for students who are frequently marginalized by the current public-school structures. While the focus of this article has been on ELLs and those who have special education needs, the ideas here are based on an anti-racist and inclusionary philosophy. Lack of equity in our public schools has been an issue for too long and without overcoming this issue, society as a whole will suffer. The world can no longer afford to have students fail, underachieve, or be isolated. The world is seeing firsthand what happens when schools are not allowed to fully educate students. Our nation is at a crossroads, and education and equity must progress hand-in-hand. Teachers, principals, parents, and community members must demand and assure, to the greatest extent possible, that all our students will be successful in school. There are no legitimate excuses for anything less.

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