



Assessing Learning Disabilities (LDs) In English Language Learners

Being diagnosed with a learning disability is a serious matter. Learning disabilities are genetic and can be passed on to one's children, affecting their success in school as well as the parent's success.

Read answers to Frequently Asked Questions about assessing learning disabilities (LDs) in English Language Learners.

- **What is a "learning disability," or LD?**

The term learning disability (LD) is a legal, medical diagnosis referring to differences in neurological functioning that interfere with learning and social relationships. A learning-disabled adult has intelligence within the normal range.

- **Is my English language learner also struggling with LDs?**

Adults who are enrolled in English as a Second Language classes and who exhibit behaviors indicative of learning disabilities may or may not be legally disabled. Many of the same behaviors can be seen in persons who have experienced trauma or may have come from circumstances where they did not have the opportunity for formal schooling and may not have basic "learning how to learn" skills

- **How can I verify that my English language learner has LD(s)?**

Care must be taken in labeling any student, including English language learners, as learning disabled until they can be officially diagnosed because there often is a stigma that accompanies such a label. As of this writing (2009), there are no known assessment instruments for certifying learning disabilities in adults who are not fluent in English.

However, if instructors observe behaviors that they suspect suggest a learning disability, teachers can employ a set of instructional strategies which will benefit not only learning disabled English language learners, but all students. In other words, these same instructional strategies are effective for students who make progress slowly, who lack formal school experience, and who have psychological problems learning.

- **What behaviors should I look for in my English language learners?**

View the [Behavior Checklist for Identifying Possible Learning Disabled Students](#).

- **What instructional strategies support English language learners with LDs in a multilevel environment?**

In a multilevel setting, grouping students according to their instructional needs and using cooperative learning activities have been shown to be very effective. The California Department of Education recommends the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to create lesson plans.

For more information on instructional strategies that support English language learners with LDs , visit the Lesson Planning section of the Virtual Workroom.

Designing Multilevel Lessons that Accommodate All Learners, including Those Suspected of Having Learning Disabilities

- Use Universal Design for Learning in planning lessons.
- Teach small parts of a lesson in sequential steps.
- Be highly structured; for example, put the outline of the lesson on the board everyday so activities are predictable.
- Provide multisensory instruction to address all students? learning preferences.
- Build on students? strengths and prior knowledge.
- Simplify language but not content; for example, teach students at different levels to fill out a job application at different levels of difficulty.
- Use visuals, realia, and pictures to help students understand new vocabulary.
- Allow students the time they need to process new information before calling on them to give answers. In a multilevel setting, this is where cooperative learning can be effective; a less proficient group can be assigned one task, while more proficient group can be assigned two tasks to do in the same amount of time.
- Provide a learning environment that is quiet and well-lit and that has space for students to work alone or in groups.
- Build community among the students so they feel safe to make mistakes and have opportunities to practice social skills.
- If students do not seem to understand a new concept, rephrase the information in different ways rather than repeating it.
- Be aware that students may not have a problem with taking in new information but may need time to sort and retrieve it; allow time for thinking.
- Use technology to give students all the time they need to practice a lesson in a private setting.
- If available in your program, use assistive technology, such as a computer that will read to the student; computers have been shown to support learning disabled students by helping to build self-esteem and providing immediate feedback to learners.

To meet the needs of adult learning-disabled ESL students, the field of adult education needs to work towards long-term, stable sources of funding for research in the areas of assessment and instruction, professional development for teachers, and assistive technology.

- **Why is my English language learner making such slow progress?**

After the teacher has used the Observation Checklist to observe the student over several days and has found behaviors indicating a learning disability, the teacher should rule out other reasons for a lack of expected progress.

Schwarz and Terrill (1997) have noted these reasons for slow progress in learning English:

- Age
- Poor health that affects attendance
- Not having the aptitude to readily learn a language
- Stress and anxiety resulting from trauma resulting in difficulty concentrating and poor memory
- Interference from the student's primary language such as having to learn a new alphabet or directionality of the new language
- Lack of time to practice outside of class
- Problems in coping with everyday life such as worries about money, deportation, housing
- Lack of effective study habits

The above problems are likely to affect all areas of learning, whereas a learning disability will affect only one area, such as reading.

After ruling out the above reasons, adult educators can seek out resources for testing, through local learning disabilities specialists, university programs, and/or K-12 resources.

- **When should I refer my learner for assessment?**

Do not refer a student for assessment unless you feel very strongly that the [behaviors you are observing](#) are frequent and the lack of progress in learning English is pronounced and not explained by other reasons

If you feel the student could benefit from assessment, remember that, as of April 2009 multiple standardized tests designed to diagnose learning disabilities in English language learners do not exist.

- **Why can't I use existing LD diagnostic tests with my English language learners?**

Tests normed on native English speakers cannot be translated into another language and used with non-native speakers because the concepts and language being tested may not be translatable and thus would not be valid.

- **What alternative assessments can a teacher use?**

Recommended alternative assessments include the following:

- Have the English language learner interviewed in his/her primary language. This will help determine the student's language learning history, education in his/her native country, social background, family history of the behaviors you observed, the learner's perception of why she/he is having difficulty, and what the learner perceives as his/her strengths.
- Encourage the student to get a vision and hearing test. Sometimes an adult English language learner does not make progress because they cannot see the print clearly or hear the teacher or students' voices easily. The students may not have had the benefit of such tests before immigrating.
- Collect results from the above into a portfolio to document student performance over time, together with attendance data and work samples. When resources become available to do standardized testing with English language learners, the portfolio will provide a record of alternative indicators of a learning disability to support assessment data.

- **What are the legal rights of English language learners with LDs?**

In a Web search conducted in April 2009, about legislation protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, CALPRO found no information related to immigrants or refugees. While there is extensive information about the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, there is no mention of who is eligible.

There are very stringent rules regarding recent documentation of assessment and having an impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, such as learning or work.

Latham (2005) recommends consulting an attorney with expertise in ADA/RA issues and checking state law.

Latham notes that in employees' lawsuits against their employers for accommodations in the workplace, 95% of the employees' lawsuits have been lost.

Download an Observation Checklist* to help you monitor your students for behaviors often associated with learning disabilities.

For More In-Depth Study of Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities

- Read the course descriptions of [Designing Programs for Adults with Learning Disabilities \(Self-Directed Online\)](#) an online four-week course.
- Find out how to [schedule a workshop](#) in your region.
- View the [Facilitated Online Course](#) catalog to see the schedule and registration information for the upcoming four-week classes.