



# Needs are Special

*Audrey Cohan and  
Andrea Honigsfeld* redefine  
Learning Disability as applied  
to the English Language  
Learner

**In the U.S., English Language Learners (ELLs) are now one in five** (DiCerbo, 2006). Between 1994/1995 and 2004/2005, LEP (Limited English Proficient) students grew more than twice as fast as their English speaking counterparts (NCELA, nd). Most educators are likely to encounter children who do not speak English fluently, though the likelihood is much higher in certain regions of the country. A unique challenge for many of these teachers and administrators is working with ELLs who are struggling learners (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Baca & Cervantes, 2004). They may take longer to acquire English than their typically developing classmates do; they may hit a plateau in their language development or experience setbacks; they may be demonstrating achievement in one content area while falling behind rapidly in another. The possible scenarios describing their difficulties are numerous; the label often attached to these learners seems simple: LD. Or is it really that simple? What does LD potentially stand for when it comes to educating English Language Learners?

#### What is LD?

LD is traditionally used as an abbreviation for Learning Disability, which is defined as “a disorder that affects people’s ability to either interpret what they see and hear or to link information from different parts of the brain” (www.ldonline.org). In this article, we will suggest that LD may have a number of different interpretations for ELLs — language distance, learning difficulty, linguistic diversity, language distinction, and learning style difference. These possibilities must first be considered before it comes to a diagnosis of a language learning disorder or a learning disability.

#### LD as Language Distance

LD may be seen as language distance. English is a Germanic language using the Roman alphabet. Its basic word order is subject-verb-object as in I-love-you. In reading and writing, speakers of English progress from the top left hand corner of the page to the bottom right hand corner. Students speaking/reading/writing in languages that are the furthest away

structurally, phonetically, and alphabetically from English may encounter additional challenges acquiring the language. Imagine a Chinese student, learning to read and write in English, who has already developed an understanding of the Chinese morphology system. In a Chinese ideograph, each character stands for one concept and one morpheme. New concepts are formed when there are combinations of ideographs placed side by side. In Arabic, the typical word order in a sentence is verb-subject-object, which is in conflict with the English subject-verb-object sentence formation. In both Bengali and Urdu, the word order is subject-object-verb, which poses yet another challenge for English language learners (for more information see Chapter 2 of *The Teaching of Language Arts to Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners: Learning Standards for Native Language Art*, 2004).

#### LD as Learning Difficulty

LD may also mean learning difficulty due to culture shock or other socio-cultural, academic, or emotional factors. Some newcomers to this country may have undergone trauma of extreme measures (seeing death, experiencing hunger, living in poverty); others may experience distress or sorrow over leaving everything familiar behind: a home, extended family members, friends, toys, and most important, their established, predictable, daily routine. Adjusting to living in a new culture may take its toll on the students and their families: acculturation is gradual a process of acquiring and integrating the norms and expectations of the new culture into one's lives (Langer de Ramirez, 2006). Some families may struggle to survive, with parent(s) barely able to provide the basic necessities for their children.

Learning difficulty could be caused by the mismatch of ELLs' prior knowledge or background experience compared to what is being taught in a U.S. classroom. We deliberately did not use the terms "lack of prior knowledge" or "background experience" to emphasize that it is of utmost importance to note that many of our immigrant youth may arrive with a wealth of personal and academic knowledge and experience, much of which remains unknown to their teachers in their new classes. When academic subjects are considered, math and science curricula around the globe may resemble each other when compared among countries. On the other hand, the subject matter of social studies and literature classes may be particularly unique to each country. It is also not uncommon that the perspective presented to the students may be diabolically opposite. Think of how World War I may be taught in Turkey or World War II in Japan or Hungary.

#### LD as Linguistic Diversity

LD may be seen as linguistic diversity. Some of our ELLs may not only be proficient in their native language, they might speak and understand more than one language and dialect. Being bilingual, bidialectal, or even trilingual is the norm in many parts of the world. Students from Haiti are likely to speak Haitian Creole, French, and possibly some English. Some ELLs may even have advanced literacy skills in multiple languages. Yet, others from the very same linguistic background may have never had the oppor-

tunity to develop even their native language completely and may be considered semilingual (Cummins, 2000). This type of language deprivation (yet another possible interpretation of LD) may lead to additional challenges for the child when he or she needs to cope with complex academic content in a new language (Baker, 2000).

#### LD as Language Distinction

LD can also indicate language distinction. The acronyms BICS and CALP were first introduced by Cummins (1979) to refer to a distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). His intention was to draw attention to the very different time periods typically required by immigrant children to acquire conversational fluency in their second language as compared to grade-appropriate academic proficiency in the target language. BICS is typically developed within two years whereas CALP may take five to seven years or even as long as 10 years (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). Most students typically develop conversational or social language with relative ease, whereas the language of academic learning may pose challenges for those who may appear fluent in the hallway, lunchroom, or playground.

#### LD as Learning-style Difference

LD may also be defined as learning-style difference. Learning style refers to the way each student begins to process, internalize, and retain new and difficult information (Dunn, 2007). Learning-style researchers and practitioners view each learner as a unique individual with a set of learning-style characteristics. Dunn and Honigfeld (2006) offered a descriptive analysis and practical suggestion for teaching literacy to learners of various perceptual and processing style strengths:

GLOBAL/AUDITORY learners respond well to listening to stories being read to them dramatically. Games, role-playing, and dramatizations are excellent follow-up activities that contribute to their comprehension processes. Songs related to the story, and flashcards with the key vocabulary words can be used effectively for reinforcement.

GLOBAL/VISUAL learners benefit from stories with colorful illustrations and dramatic or humorous content that captures the youngsters' imagination. Follow-up activities for this group should include responding to literature by drawing, painting, and illustrating with corresponding word labeling, as well as their use of tactual resources.

GLOBAL/TACTUAL learners respond best when their teacher introduces new concepts and vocabulary words with tactual resources before the students hear the story. These game-like activities familiarize students with the key words so that this hard-to-teach group of children can become successful readers. For reinforcement, students may make up their own stories, original songs, and poems which incorporate the new vocabulary.

GLOBAL/KINESTHETIC learners enjoy whole-body activities that require continuing movement or out-of-seat involvement. Role-playing and dramatization should occur before they hear the story—or along with