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### **Identifying a Learning Disability in an ESL student**

English as Second Language learners are often over-identified or under identified as having a learning disability in our current education system. Cummins (1991) claims ESL students are often over-identified as having a LD because educators often mistake the student's slow progress in acquiring the English language as them having a disability. Educators often overlook the student's prior education, literacy in native language, time in new country, learning style, or motivation as all reasons for the students progressing at a slow learning rate (Cummins, 1991, p.77). On the contrary, at the same time ESL students are often under-identified for having a LD as the teacher mistakes their disability as their natural progressing learning acquisition, as learning a new language exhibits similarities in behaviour as a student with an academic disability (Fielding-Barnsley & Susan, 2002). ESL students are often misdiagnosed and wrongly labelled because of the inadequate testing techniques that are used by professionals. Current testing systems today tend to be in "English and there is a lack of personnel qualified to assess the English language learners exacerbates the problem of inappropriate referrals" (Ortiz et al, 1985). The issue of disproportionate representation for ESL students has persisted because of the lack of knowledge on the educator's part and the inadequate testing available. In the essay that follows I will use the work of several prominent ESL scholars to discuss how an educator can recognize if an ESL student has a learning disability and what problems can arise from labelling a minority student.

### **How to Diagnose an LD in an ESL student**

The difficulties in learning a new language and in adjusting to a new culture may overshadow a learning disability in ESL students. Winnifred Tang states that the “symptoms of an undiagnosed learning disability are often misattributed to causes such as poor cultural adjustment, poor motivation and the failure to speak English in social and family settings” (Tang, 2013). In Ontario, as well as the rest of Canada, there is an increase in the number of ESL students arriving. These “English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) students are estimated to form 20-50% of the general student population in urban K-12 systems across Canada” (Roessingh, 1999). Thus, with the increase in ESL population in our school systems teachers need to be prepared to assess if a child has a learning disability in order for the child to obtain a proper education that best suits their needs. Prominent ESL scholars have written on numerous of techniques, procedures and strategies that can help teachers discover if their language learning student has an LD. Many educators believe that one cannot reliably assess and diagnose a reading disability until the ESL learners has acquired the full English language and skills. However, this is an inadequate assumption as ESL students can indicate signs of having a LD while learning a new language.

Educators assume that diagnosing an ESL student should not be done until the child’s language skills are compatible to their monolingual peers. However, Cummins (1991) argues that ESL students exhibit signs of possessing an LD while they are learning the English language. It is true that ESL learners have minimal skills in reading, writing and in listening in English, which makes it hard to diagnose their disability, but the child acquiring the language exhibits signs of possessing a learning disability that should not be ignored. Research has shown that ESL students can exhibit signs of dyslexia while learning vocabulary and writing words in a paragraph. ESL students can develop appropriate reading and writing skills at an adequate level

to the students at their general grade level by familiarizing themselves with vocabulary and fluent word-level reading skills; “ESL status does not undermine the ability of ESL learners to develop accurate and fluent word recognition skills, including the ability to decode “non-words” or unfamiliar words” (Geva, & Farnia, 2012). Geva et al. (2000) composed a study comparing the development of an ESL student word recognition and phonological processing skills in comparison to a same-aged native speaker. The study concluded that the ESL and native language speaker student after a year possessed similar word recognition performance and reading skills, but differed in regards to their oral language discourse. Additionally, this study displayed that both children exemplified similar difficulties when tested. This study indicates that ESL and native language speakers possess similar reading techniques and learning skills. Therefore, an educator can recognize if a child has dyslexia if they persistently struggle with word recognition, decoding, and vocabulary skills regardless of their English language skills.

Analysing and tracking an English language learner’s cognitive development and progress can also help an educator decipher if their student has a learning disability. A teacher needs to track their students’ progress in “phonological awareness, naming speed of simple items such as digits or letters, and memory are cognitive processes that can signal the existence of a reading disability in an ESL learner” (Geva, & Farnia, 2012). These skills are learned and developed over time and are less reliant on language proficiency (Geva, & Farnia, 2012). Siegal, Leasux, and Rupp (2007) study examined 884 native English speakers and 284 ESL speakers in the sixth grade studying their cognitive progression and their development in learning reading and writing skills. The research showed that both groups of students can acquire learning skills at the same pace and both groups can demonstrate their learned skills on several assessment activities. The research shows that an educator can assess a student’s cognitive process and

development in their ESL student the same way they can assess a monolingual student in their classroom.

It is also important for educators to acknowledge that if a student had difficulty in learning their first language the same difficulties will persist in the student's language acquisition. Share (2008) states that "learners who have decoding problems will show some delays even when they learn to read in a simple, regular writing system, such as Spanish or Dutch, and often will not be able to achieve adequate reading fluency even if their decoding skills are adequate" (p.599). Research has also shown that the students reading and writing level in their first language correlates to their progress in the second language. In addition, many ESL students that are new to the country that have not obtained a proper education in their native country will have a difficult time learning English. Teachers need to know their students educational background and learning strengths and weaknesses to ensure the student learns the second language effectively. Research has suggested that it is useful for a teacher to assess a child's word reading skills in both the home and language and the school language, and to look for similarities in performance across the two languages (Geva, & Farnia, 2012).

### **Problems with Labelling in a Minority Group (Connections to Readings)**

Several ESL students are misdiagnosed and labelled as having a learning disability in our school system because educators refer these students for testing because of their poor academic or behavioural performance in the classroom. It is estimated that 56% of ESL students are identified as having a special need, which means that an ESL student has a higher chance of being classified as having an LD than their English speaking peers (Salazar & Stephenson, 2003). The reason ESL students are wrongly labeled and placed in special education programs is

due to the fact that there is no adequate testing available for these students. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) state students are usually tested using IQ tests, that are produced for native English students, or by being tested by only an English speaker educator that does not have a full understanding on the child's educational background or cultural experiences. It is also hard to diagnose an ESL student with a disability as the child's parents are usually not proficient in the English language themselves and would not be able to assist in the testing process nor provide information on their child to help with the diagnoses process. Parents of an ESL student are usually not involved in their child's diagnosing process due to the language barrier or because of their busy work schedule.

ESL Students are often not given fair testing or proper support from the education staff because of their low income status, academic level, and discriminatory bias held by the teachers. Riley and Ungerleider (2008) deem that "racism and discrimination negatively influence the expectations teachers have for minority students, which adversely affects their academic achievement" (p. 379). Teachers often believe that ESL students have not obtained a "proper" education in their native country before coming to Canada, and thus are not academically up to par with native born speakers their own age. In addition, a common held ideology teachers have is that ESL students do not have a strong learning background and need additional educational assistance to work to achieve their full academic potential. For this reason ESL students are tested and labeled as having a special need and are placed into programs that reduce their opportunities for learning. Wrongly labeling a student will hinder the child from reaching his/her full academic potential and will lower the child's self-esteem, which will lead to the students mistrusting the education system.

Parekh, Killoran, and Crawford (2011) have found that there is an overrepresentation of minority and low-income students in special needs programs within the Toronto District School Board. TDSB in theory is dedicated to providing an equitable and fair education to all their students, but a neoliberal attitude has dominated the schools principle foundation of inclusivity. In the school system today children that come from a high socio-economic family thrive and are given adequate support and funding in their education. On the contrary, students that come from low socio economic backgrounds and areas are being ignored as they do not have the proper educational resources to obtain a suitable education. The poor and ethnic minority students are greatly over-represented in the identification of students with learning and behavioural disabilities (Parekh, Killoran, & Crawford, 2011, p. 251). English as a second language learners often come from low socio economic families and do not obtain the proper educational resources or funds to help them succeed in our current economy. Due to the low academic support these students obtain, they are often placed into special needs programs and segregated from the rest of the students. Labeling and segregating these students diminishes their chances to reach their full academic potential and limits their opportunities to thrive in our current socio-economic system.

**Conclusion: What can be done to solve this problem?**

The issue of wrongly diagnosing an ESL student with a learning disability has been linked to teacher bias and inappropriate testing strategies. Several teachers assume that an ESL student has a disability because they have not received a proper education in their native lands. Teachers need to be educated on their student's educational background, cultural education system, and family background to truly understand the learning needs and the strengths of their students. As a teacher within the public school system, I have found the majority of teachers do not connect to their students on a personal level and assume that their students possess a LD

without gaining a deeper understanding on their student's background. Educators of ESL students often ignore the child's time in a new country, literacy in native language, and the hardships the child has experienced in coming and settling in a new land (Cummins, 1991, p.77). In order to correct teacher bias teaching facilities need to better train their teachers on different educational systems around the world and promote communal involvement for their staff.

Additionally, another area that needs to be corrected is how ESL students are being tested and being misdiagnosed as having an LD. Current testing systems today tend to be in "English and there is a lack of personnel qualified to assess the English language learners that exacerbates the problem of inappropriate referrals" (Ortiz et al, 1985). Tests need to be done using the dual language approach and a translator needs to be brought in so the child can be tested in both languages to ensure that he/she has a problem in language acquisition. More research needs to be conducted on how educators can refer students for testing and the testing methods that are done for these ESL students to be properly assessed.

In conclusion, diagnosing an ESL student with an LD is a problem that needs to be addressed. Several ESL students are not obtaining a proper education because they are either being misdiagnosed as having an LD, while others struggling without receiving proper educational assistants. As a public school ESL teacher to me this issue of misdiagnosing an ESL student is crucial and is a problem facing many of our public school boards.

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