

Learning Issues Frequently Seen In ELs (What it may seem like) and Language Difference Related Reasons for the Difficulty

Adapted by Jarice Butterfield, Ph. D.

Academic Learning difficulties
ELs often have difficulty with grade level academic language and concepts because it takes at least five years for nonnative speakers to display native-speaker like functioning in academics.
Language disorder
Lack of fluency and correct syntax is a natural part of learning a new language. Students may require more “wait time” as they process an utterance in one language and translate into another. This “wait time” - may be misinterpreted as a language processing issue.
Attention and memory problems
ELs may have difficulty paying attention and remembering if they cannot relate new information to their previous experiences in their respective cultures. ELs may also be experiencing exhaustion due to the task of learning in a language in which they are not yet proficient.
Withdrawn behavior
When students are learning a new language and adapting to a new culture a “silent period” is normal.
Also, this behavior might be appropriate in the student’s culture.
Aggressive behavior
The student may not understand appropriate school behavior and language in the US. Also this behavior may be appropriate in the students’ culture.
Social and Emotional problems
When students are learning to live in a new culture and using a new language, social and emotional problems often develop.

When It is Appropriate to Make A Referral of An EL to Special Education

Even though it takes time to learn a language, we need to recognize that some ELs, just as students in the English speaking population, do have disabilities that may make them eligible for special education. As mentioned above, because it is difficult to determine if an EL’s difficulties stem from learning a new language or from a true disability, some school districts are reluctant to consider referring ELs for special education services until the student has been learning English for a predetermined number of years usually two or three. **This practice of waiting a number of years before referring a student for special education services is detrimental to ELs who may truly have disabilities**

Below some possible reasons for initiating a special education referral for an ELL:

- The EL student is exhibiting the academic/behavioral difficulties in both first and second languages
- The EL teacher and other general education staff indicate that the ELL is performing differently from his/her “like peers”.
- The EL student displays very little or no academic progress resulting from appropriate instructional strategies, alternative instruction, or academic interventions.
- Parents confirm the academic/ behavioral difficulties seen in the school setting (lack of response to intervention documented over time.
- School personnel such as tutors and aides confirm the academic/behavioral difficulties seen in the classroom setting

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