English Learners and Dyslexia

This fact sheet provides information about important considerations when evaluating English learners for dyslexia. Classroom teachers may find it helpful as they observe students for possible referral for further assessment. It also includes guidelines for assessment specialists who may provide screening and assessment support.

Why Focus on English Learners?

Five million English learners attend public schools in the United States. Because these students represent 10% of the school population, it is important to understand the issues surrounding early identification of dyslexia and other reading disabilities among English learners. This fact sheet addresses those issues and offers some recommendations for the identification process.

When discussing English learners and dyslexia, keep in mind that although 400 different native languages are represented within the English learner (EL) population of students, 75% of these students speak Spanish in the home. Therefore, much of what we know about English learners comes from research involving Spanish-speaking English learners.

Importance of Early Identification

Early identification of reading disabilities in all students is very important. When it comes to students whose first language is not English, however, researchers have found that non-native speakers with dyslexia are sometimes less likely to be identified, while at other times, they are over-identified.

In a recent study, English learners with dyslexia and African American learners were less likely to be identified with reading disabilities than other students. This finding was true not only in schools with small numbers of English learners, but also in schools with a higher percentage of EL students. Another study found that EL students might be less likely to be identified with dyslexia early on, but later might be over-identified as having dyslexia. In this case, the study found that the proportion of non-native, English-speaking students who were identified with dyslexia in kindergarten and first grade was lower than expected. Yet by third grade, the proportion of non-native, English-speaking students identified with dyslexia was higher than expected.

Why might this happen? Schools may fail to identify dyslexia by attributing any English reading and writing difficulties to their status as English learners, even if those students also exhibit characteristics of dyslexia. On the other hand, a student with limited opportunities for developing English oral language proficiency and English literacy (Hispanic English learners in particular) might be increasingly likely to be misidentified with dyslexia as they progress in school, when the issue might actually be limited skills due to lack of exposure to English. There is clearly a need to define the important factors to keep in mind when identifying reading disabilities, such as dyslexia, among English learners.

General Considerations for Early Identification of Dyslexia Among English Learners

In 2002 the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) adopted the following definition of dyslexia: "*a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.*"

Screening and assessments for dyslexia must include an evaluation of the primary characteristics of dyslexia: phonological awareness, decoding, fluent word recognition, and spelling. It is also important to determine the resulting impact these difficulties can have on measures such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and background knowledge.

To identify English learners with dyslexia, consider the following variables during screening and assessment:

1. Determine the number of years of high-quality, native language instruction in reading and writing, as well as instruction in English language and literacy, to ensure that the difficulty is not due to a lack of instruction.

2. Examine the variables that may be causing any difficulties with reading and writing in English. A lack of proficiency in spoken English will affect the ability to learn to read and write English. In addition, assess the student's ability to read and write in the native language. If a student has difficulty in their native language, that might point toward dyslexia. However, if a student seems to have literacy skills in their native language but struggles with English, the issue might be related to limited exposure to high-quality instruction in English. Teasing apart these two factors is important for an accurate identification of dyslexia.

3. Review the family history. Because dyslexia is hereditary, a family history of dyslexia— or symptoms that might point to dyslexia or other related conditions—should be documented.

4. Note that when comparing literacy skills across languages, students with dyslexia may appear to be within normal limits for decoding skills when they are reading and writing in transparent languages (those with reliable and stable letter-sound correspondences, such as Spanish) due to the regular and reliable patterns of the language. As a result, when screening or assessing in transparent languages, reading fluency and spelling skills may be better indicators of dyslexia.

5. Consider performance, during the screening and assessment process, in relation to peers with similar native languages and background experiences. This comparison is especially important if the available tests do not include a significant number of English learners in the sample used to determine what is expected for the population (the *normative sample*). This data is another piece of information that can help with the process of

teasing apart any possible effects of dyslexia from the effects of being an English learner.

6. Collect samples of the student's work (for instance, written spelling assessment, written expression, and oral reading with error analysis) and evaluate that work along with the results of progress monitoring and other tests to determine the rate of progress achieved and to document any history of limited progress.

7. Review specific error patterns and ensure that they are not a result of overgeneralization from the student's native language to English. Determine if the errors are typical or unusual when compared to other English learners who are native speakers of the same language.

8. Work with the student's parents, caregivers, and educators to determine if any educational, environmental, or personal factors may be related to learning to read. The more data gathered to develop an understanding of the student, the more accurate the assessment and decision-making process is likely to be.

9. Keep in mind that outcomes may vary depending on a number of factors, including the student's first language and the language of instruction (whether English or another language), the type and quality of language and literacy instruction received thus far, and the consistency of its implementation. These variables need to be considered as the student is evaluated for possible dyslexia.

10. Create a team of experts who understand language and reading development among English learners so they may review the data and make decisions regarding the necessary type of instruction and level of intensity.

What to Look for During Screening

A screening is a brief measurement of a set of current skills. Screening tools provide information as to whether students are at the expected level of performance and may also help identify students who are at risk for later skill development.

Dyslexia screening in the early years, such as at the end of kindergarten, typically includes measures of phoneme awareness, rapid naming of letters, and both letter-sound and sound-letter knowledge. For English learners, assessment of oral language proficiency levels is also necessary. By first and second grade, typical screenings may include measures of phoneme awareness, word recognition, reading fluency, oral language, reading comprehension, and spelling. However, for English learners it will be important to monitor progress in each of these areas more frequently than twice per year.

Another important consideration is the language of instruction. Some English learners receive language instruction in their native language. Screening measures should therefore be conducted in that same language to ensure alignment with the language of instruction. Other English learners may participate in English as a Second Language classrooms. They will be screened in English, but it is important to keep in mind that these students will be developing their

proficiency in spoken English at the same time they are developing English literacy skills. If proficiency in spoken English is impeded, it will affect the student's ability to progress with reading and writing.

For these reasons and more, it is important to pay particular attention to English learners' progress in English as well as their native language and to compare their progress to their peers who are also English learners. If a student is not making expected progress in English, compare the development of those same skills in the native language and evaluate the results based upon the language of instruction (which is often English). If skills are below the expected level in both the native language and English, further testing should be conducted to determine if the student is exhibiting a reading disability such as dyslexia. The need for further testing should be determined based upon the factors discussed above, including the type of language instruction the student is receiving and the recommendations of teachers, parents, and others involved in the education of the student.

Essential Aspects of Assessment of an English Learner for Dyslexia

An assessment for dyslexia is a more thorough analysis of student performance and is intended to dig deeper than a screening. An assessment will include measures for each of the components of reading and writing. The assessment should be conducted by an individual who is knowledgeable in testing and measurement and understands first and second language and literacy development.

Specific components to assess include the following:

- The student's understanding and use of language in general, aligned to the language of instruction
- Phoneme awareness
- Rapid naming, which can include letters, numbers, or pictures
- Word reading skills, including reading of real words and pseudo-words
- Word reading fluency, including accuracy and rate
- Sentence reading fluency, including accuracy, prosody, and rate
- Paragraph reading fluency, including accuracy, prosody, and rate
- Reading comprehension at the sentence and paragraph level
- Written language skills to include word-level spelling as well as writing composition (narrative and informational) at the sentence and paragraph levels

Factors to Consider When Evaluating Assessment Results for English Learners

To determine the presence or absence of dyslexia in English learners, it is essential to separate the effects of second language acquisition from effects that would result from dyslexia. Therefore, when evaluating the results of standardized tests, a student's literacy levels and environmental and schooling factors for the native language should be compared to their performance in English or any other second language. A list of recommendations follows below:

1. Identify whether diverse populations are included in the normative sample of any test. As an examiner, you must review the characteristics of the population that were used to

determine the expected result to establish whether English learners were included in that population.

2. Observe the language or vocabulary that is used within the test directions. Determine if some of the vocabulary will be difficult for the English learner to understand. Review the test manual for any recommendations for testing English learners.

3. Determine if the test items reflect cultural bias. Will some of the test items be irrelevant to the individual student's world experiences?

4. Remember that at the early stages of second language or literacy acquisition, the reading level of an English learner may not be as strong as their monolingual English-speaking peers. However, as the English learner becomes more proficient in language and literacy, the second language skills can be expected to become comparable to the performance of native English-speaking peers.

5. Use multiple measures and formats for testing.

6. Consider the specific context of learning opportunities in both native and second languages. The key to an accurate diagnosis of dyslexia for an English learner is ensuring that the difficulty exists in both the native and second language.

Next Steps

The number of English learners attending schools in the U.S. is continuing to grow. Early identification of dyslexia in English learners is important and can be achieved by understanding some essential considerations for identification. These considerations include a thorough developmental history, a review of the language in which the student is being taught, and the specific approach to literacy instruction that is being used, along with other environmental factors. The tests used to screen and assess must also be valid and reliable for English learners: check to see that English learners have been included in the normative sample and compare the student's progress to that of other English learners. Failure to consider all of these factors is likely to result in over- or under-identification of a reading disability among English learners.

A comprehensive and collaborative team approach can assist in the early identification of dyslexia. Once identified, English learners can benefit from structured literacy instruction with accommodations for language proficiency and, wherever possible, cross-language instructional techniques that capitalize on the similarities of the native language.

It is certainly possible for English learners with dyslexia to learn and achieve second language literacy. Accurate identification is the first step toward this goal.

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