Identifying English Learners with Disabilities

English learners are the fastest-growing group of students in U.S. schools, and nearly 15 percent of them are identified as having disabilities.¹ As with all students, federal law requires schools to provide English learners with disabilities with the most appropriate education to meet their needs and to track and report their progress.²

Yet, many teachers struggle with recognizing when their English learner students have disabilities. How can they determine whether a particular child’s learning difficulties stem from limited English-language proficiency or a diagnosable learning disability?

Here are three evidence-based recommendations³ that can help.

**Form collaborative teams**

Bring together these diverse voices and expertise to identify and address English learners’ needs:

- Parents and family members
- Students
- English learner/bilingual education teachers and experts
- Cultural liaisons
- General education teachers
- Special education teachers
- School administrators
- Other school personnel, such as psychologists, speech pathologists, and trained interpreters

**Use multiple measures**

Consider these data sources when assessing English learners’ eligibility for special education services:

- Student health and attendance records
- Parent interviews and surveys
- Classroom and home observations
- Student work samples
- Standardized test results
- Local assessments
- Teacher interviews
- Student performance data
- Oral language samples
- History of interventions provided to student

**Be culturally and linguistically responsive**

Take these steps to create a classroom that values English learners’ strengths and fosters their success:

- Integrate students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Build and nurture positive relationships with students, parents, and families
- Select assessments that produce valid results for English learners
- Consider students’ skills in English and their native languages
- Hold high expectations in language acquisition and content learning
Learn more about identifying and serving English learners with disabilities

CCSSO English Learners with Disabilities Guide

IES Practice Guide: Teaching Academic Content and Literacy to English Learners in Elementary and Middle School
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/19

Processes and Challenges in Identifying Learning Disabilities Among Students Who Are English Language Learners in Three New York State Districts
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectId=116

English Learner Tool Kit for State and Local Education Agencies (SEAs and LEAs)
https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/english-learner-toolkit/index.html

RTI for English Language Learners: Appropriately Using Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools to Improve Instructional Outcomes

Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures


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ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast