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 recommendations[3] 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

مرحبا

¡Hola!

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
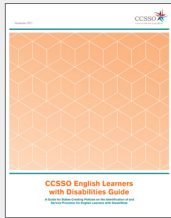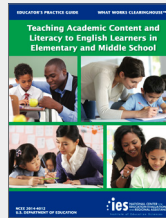- Hold high expectations in language acquisition and content learning

Learn more about identifying and serving English learners with disabilities

CCSSO English Learners with Disabilities Guide

https://ccsso.org/resource-library/ccsso-english-learners-disabilities-guide

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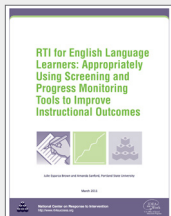
https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/19

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
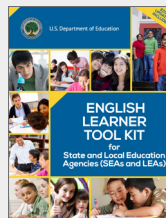
English Learner Tool Kit for State and Local Education Agencies (SEAs and LEAs)

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

https://rti4success.org/sites/default/files/rtiforells.pdf
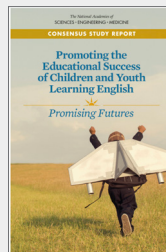
Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures

https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24677/promoting-the-educational-success-of-children-and-youth-learning-english

1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). English language learners in public schools. Retrieved January 15, 2019 from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp.

2. Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 [As Amended through P.L. 115–224, Enacted July 31, 2018], 20 U.S.C. § 6841 (2018).

3 Park, S., Martinez, M., & Chou, F. (2017). *CCSSO English learners with disabilities guide.* Washington DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. https://ccsso.org/resource-library/ccsso-english-learners-disabilities-guide; Sánchez, M. T., Parker, C., Akbayin, B., & McTigue, A. (2010). *Processes and challenges in identifying learning disabilities among students who are English language learners in three New York State districts* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2010–085). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED508343

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

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