

**English Language Learners Does Not Equal Special Education**

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**Abstract**

This article aims to highlight the challenges faced by schools when addressing a wide range of learning needs—specifically those of English language learners (ELL) and students with exceptionalities. Both populations of students have a history of being isolated rather than included with same-age peers due to nontraditional learning profiles. Many educators are overwhelmed with the idea of providing services to diverse learners and have limited knowledge of ways to include all learners with brain-based research practices. Both ELLs and students with exceptionalities can benefit from teaching that promotes learning that lends itself to using the whole brain and triggering transfer of knowledge from short- to long-term memory. This article highlights issues faced by ELL educators, special educators, and classroom teachers and provides concrete teaching strategies that support and include all learners.

*Keywords:* English language learner (ELL), special education, brain research, language, inclusionary practices

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Public school education and educators are consistently in the spotlight. With a significant emphasis placed on high stakes testing scores and graduation rates, the need for understanding how to teach all learners is increasingly important (Sousa, 2017; Tarbuton, 2018; Zhao, 2009). Tarbuton (2018) emphasized the importance of providing a more diverse classroom to increase student success, with student-centered learning, integrating technology, and setting high expectations for all learners of particular importance. The pressures of society have placed a great deal of pressure on teachers to address the emotional and social aspects of learning (Burke Harris, 2019). Transfer, “the ability to learn in one situation and then use that learning, possibly in a modified or generalized form, in another situation” (Sousa, 2017, p. 153), has long been recognized as fundamental in brain research, but are educators placing enough emphasis on its relevance for student learning? This article focuses on two specific groups of learners who are being identified more frequently in our public schools as needing more support: English language learners (ELLs) and students with special education needs.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), an ELL is “a national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient. This term is often preferred over limited-English-proficient (LEP) as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits” (p.1). Dual-language proficiency or progress toward proficiency should be seen as a strength instead of a weakness, yet Harklau (2000) found ELL students’ sense of belonging in school is directly connected to their perceptions of how peers, teachers, and administrators view them. Shapiro (2014) documented how students engaged in public protest over what they experienced as deficit discourse at school and in the community.

Special education is a broad umbrella including students with specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia), emotional disabilities, hearing and vision impairments, autism, and more severe cognitive delays (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018). When considering neuroscience research, one must consider the brains of students with disabilities process

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

information differently and teaching practices must take the different ways students with special education needs process information into account (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018).

Although the United States has come a long way since the passing of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, students identified with special education needs continue to struggle in public schools and beyond (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018). In 1997, the reauthorization of IDEA set the stage for schools: “lawmakers made their intent clear: Students are presumed to be educated in a general education class unless their disability prevents that” (Constantinescu & Samuels, 2016, p.10). The law supports special education students’ placement in the least restricted environment, and the law proposes that 90% of students should be able to graduate from high school meeting the same standards as general education students (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018); yet, students in special education are less likely to go to and complete college, and they earn nearly \$4 less per hour than former general education students in the workforce (Sanford et al., 2011).

Many schools continue to struggle with what is best for all students when it comes to addressing unique learning and behavioral needs (Armstrong, 2011). Zhao (2009) explained, “All children should be accepted and be provided with equal opportunity to help realize their potential” (p. 47), but helping all students reach their potential can be a difficult goal to achieve. The 7 million students in special education should be served with the same respect as those in general education, through innovative practices meeting their unique learning needs. As regular education has embraced new ways of thinking about neuroplasticity, such as growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) and other innovations, special education has remained stagnantly focused on diagnostic categories and remedial and corrective approaches (Armstrong, 2011).

### **Inclusive Practices**

Inclusive practices are one way to enrich the learning environment for all students. Aside from helping challenged learners to rise to higher standards, the school culture can be positively affected (Boaler & LaMar, 2019). Student experiences in inclusive schools have pointed out the

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

positive aspects of the arrangement, including being able to help their peers academically, receiving more help themselves, and learning to socialize with others different from themselves (Shogren et al., 2015). The research from Shogren et al. (2015) supports the idea that inclusion must be considered as a critical piece of building positive school experiences for all students.

This idea of inclusive practices extends not only to special education students but also to emergent bilingual students. In many U.S. public schools, English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for accessing rigorous academic content (Shapiro, 2014). This belief that proficiency in English is required prior to accessing content knowledge has led to what Valdés (2001) referred to as linguistic isolation, which can lead to academic and linguistic stagnation (Callahan, 2005). Ultimately, I believe the goal for all educators should be to include all students in the school learning community while simultaneously challenging them academically and socially. Educators can achieve equity for all learners through continual collaboration among mainstream, ELL specialists, and special educators with students and parents/guardians (Boaler & LaMar, 2018).

A 2019 report noted ELLs are among the fastest growing population of students in America's public schools (English Language Learners in Public Schools, 2019). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, an ELL who has been in the United States for less than 1 year needs to take standard assessments with their English-speaking peers, but the test scores do not count toward the school's rating. In the 2nd year, the scores are publicly reported, and by the 3rd year in the country, all ELLs' assessment results in both math and English are treated like their native-born peers' results (Klein, 2019). As of 2017, Latino students represent the second largest population of students within the United States, with 26.7% of the population in American public schools (Riser-Kostisky, 2020). Although reading performance of Latino students improved between 1992 and 2009, the gap between Latino and White students has remained constant (McFarland, 2019, p.5). Development in a student's first language (L1) can impact the development of students' second language (L2) (Cummins, 1979).

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

### **Transfer**

Researchers (Cummins, 1979; Gibbons, 2015; Vygotsky, 1986) have demonstrated that students “transfer” language skills from their L1 into their L2, but this transfer does not occur automatically. According to Cummins’s (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis, students’ ability to develop competence in L2 depends on their competency in their L1 at the time of exposure to L2. Effectively, transfer will only occur if students’ have had sufficient exposure to their L1 prior to exposure to L2. Building upon this idea, Cardenas-Hagan et al. (2007) determined Spanish-speaking students with a strong foundation in letter name and sound identification in their L1 performed better at transferring that recognition into English or L2. Providing explicit instruction in phonological awareness and oral language skills in a student’s L1 could help the student transfer their reading skills in (L2) (Cardenas-Hagan et al., 2007, p. 256).

Transfer is both essential for students to apply new learning and extremely challenging to achieve (Sousa, 2017). Failure of transfer can present in a number of ways, and teachers might have difficulty identifying the root of the problem (Sousa, 2017). ELL students and students with learning disabilities can share characteristics, including weak oral language skills, poor motivation, and low self-esteem (Ortiz et al., 2006). These similarities can often lead to ELLs disproportionately represented in special education programs (Linan-Thompson et al., 2006). Although a student with a learning disability in reading may have difficulty with reading comprehension and literacy skills due to a language processing issue, ELLs typically can learn to read in their native language but lack exposure to spoken and written English, which can adversely affect their development of English literacy skills (Perras, 2017). These differences require teachers to look deeper into the learning issues students present. Rather than focusing on deficits, teachers servicing students with language needs must be open to new findings in the field of neuroscience (Armstrong, 2011). Brain research suggests, rather than working

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

around areas of learning weaknesses, educational practices should aim to strengthen pathways to potentially change the brain processes of learners (Boaler & LaMar, 2019).

Ultimately, recommendations made for ELL students or students with special education needs (e.g., presentation of content in a variety of ways, engaging in multiple methods and media, avoiding disconnecting facts, and finding ways to connect learning) must be considered as best practices rather than specialized teaching approaches (Boaler & LaMar, 2019). Other brain-researched teaching approaches to consider include (a) explicitly teaching content-specific vocabulary in context; (b) using direct and explicit reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making predictions, monitoring and asking questions as they read, and summarizing after reading); (c) increasing exposure to print resources, including oral readings and discussion; and (d) increasing focused academic discourse (Francis et al., 2006). By refocusing efforts on teaching all students inclusively using effective classroom strategies, educators can help guide all learners to achieve academic success in U.S. public schools (Willis, 2007).

Kaplan (2019) described six strategies for teaching ELL students gathered from interviewing experienced teachers of ELL students. Kaplan suggested teachers should (a) cultivate relationships and be culturally responsive, (b) teach language skills across the curriculum, (c) emphasize productive language, (d) speak slowly and increase wait time, (e) differentiate and use multiple modalities, and (f) incorporate students' native languages and not be afraid of using technology). Using these six strategies, teachers will ultimately create an environment conducive of supporting all learners across the spectrum in a culturally responsive way. Hammond (2015) argued that when a teacher provides a space that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing, students can relax and be more apt to learn, leading to better outcomes for all.

### **Conclusion**

Creating a learning environment that is both emotionally and physically safe is probably more important than ever for the health of the overall child (Boaler & LaMar, 2019; Sousa,

## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

2017). Thankfully, the strategies included in this article are good for all students. Implementation of these and similar strategies is crucial for students who are frequently marginalized by the current public-school structures (McLeod, 2019). Although the focus of this article has been on ELLs and those who have special education needs, the ideas here are based on an anti-racist and inclusionary philosophy (Belle, 2019). Lack of equity in our public schools has been an issue for too long and without overcoming this issue, society as a whole will suffer (Belle, 2019). The world can no longer afford to have students fail, underachieve, or be isolated (Robinson 2017). The world is seeing firsthand what happens when schools are not allowed to fully educate students. Our nation is at a crossroads, and education and equity must progress hand in hand. Teachers, principals, parents, and community members must demand and assure, to the greatest extent possible, that all students will be successful in school. There are no legitimate excuses for anything less.

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## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

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## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

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## ELL DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

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