How to Distinguish a Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition Versus a Learning Disability?

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HOW TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN A LEARNING DISABILITY VERSUS A BARRIER DUE TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by

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To my husband, Paul, thank you for always encouraging education and learning in our lives. Thank you for supporting me and encouraging me at every turn. Thank you to my children, Jane, Emily and Jack who have patiently granted me the opportunity to pursue teaching from the beginning of my career as a paraprofessional in your middle school to becoming a substitute teacher while you were finding your way. Not many children want their mother to experience their preteen - teen years on the front lines. You taught me so much about culture, white privilege and diversity through your own educational experiences. Many thanks to my parents, Bob and Betty Unger and my in-laws Fred and Susan Baude who have been major cheerleaders in my pursuit of a masters of teaching in my later years. Finally, thank you to my professors and teachers at Hamline University along with the many peers that I have met who have inspired me to be a better version of myself.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.................................................................6

Background..................................................................................6

Hamline University.....................................................................9

My Professional Background..................................................10

Rationale...................................................................................11

English Language Learners and Special Education.........................13

Summary and Conclusion.............................................................14

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.................................................15

Definitions................................................................................16

Special Education.....................................................................16

English Language Learners.......................................................16

Legislation.................................................................................18

Biases and Sociological Factors..................................................20

Assumptions............................................................................20

Sociocultural Considerations....................................................21

Defining the Student..................................................................22

Teacher Identities.....................................................................23

Consequences of Biases..............................................................24

Second Language Acquisition Barriers and Supports.......................25
Understanding Second Language Acquisition .................................................. 25
Barriers ........................................................................................................... 29
Language Assessment and Testing ................................................................. 30
Concerns about Assessments ................................................................. 31
Educational Implications ............................................................................. 32
Evaluation Errors in Reading Disabilities .................................................. 33
Supports ........................................................................................................ 34
Gaps in the Research .................................................................................... 34
Summary ....................................................................................................... 35
CHAPTER THREE: Introduction ................................................................. 37
Project Design ............................................................................................... 38
Setting .......................................................................................................... 38
Target Audience ......................................................................................... 40
Method Implementation ............................................................................ 41
  First Session ............................................................................................... 41
  Second Session .......................................................................................... 42
  Third Session ............................................................................................. 44
Timeline for Completion ........................................................................... 45
Summary ....................................................................................................... 46
CHAPTER FOUR: Introduction ................................................................. 47
Major Learnings .......................................................................................... 47
Revisiting the Literature Review .............................................................. 49
Benefits and Limitations........................................................................................................50
Future Researcher..................................................................................................................52
Recommendations for Implementation....................................................................................53
Conclusion.............................................................................................................................54
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Chapter One Overview

In this chapter I will address the issue of determining when a student has a learning disability or may be struggling with second language acquisition. The issue of how to best assess English Language Learners (ELLs) who are struggling in school has been one that educators grapple to find an equitable solution to. I will look at what kind of tools we can use to help make this determination. I will explain how I arrived at my teaching career. The journey that I took to becoming an English Language (EL) teacher was varied and through those varied experiences I began to examine the processes for which we look at diverse learners. I begin to illustrate some of the ways that educators view learners with learning difficulties and how decisions are made to place them or not place them into programs to assist their learning needs. I reiterate my professional background and what led me to explore the important research question of How to Distinguish Between a Learning Disability Versus a Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition?

Background

My road to becoming an EL teacher perhaps began years ago although I did not know it. I have an undergraduate degree in communication and I have always loved language and communication, but wasn’t aware of the possibility of careers that awaited me when I graduated.

When my children were younger, I began to volunteer in schools which led to becoming a paraprofessional. I worked in an urban, title one middle school in a variety of positions assisting students in classrooms and by pulling students out to work one on one in areas where they
needed assistance. My first years were spent really getting to know and understand how the current school system worked.

Although I had children in the school system, my picture of what a classroom looked like and how it operated was quite different from what I discovered. The rows of desks where students sat with their hands folded, pencil in hand while they listened and did work were not quite the same image. Desks were in pods or all together gone, replaced by tables, stools and bean bags. Students shouted out answers, used white boards and collaborated with one another to come up with answers. It wasn’t that this was not okay or not working, but my idea of a middle school was much different from I had expected. As I have discovered over the years, giving students more choice in learning or allowing them a way to learn that best benefits their needs is important to meeting the overall goal of learning.

A study by Rosenfield, Lambert & Black (1985) looked at different types of learning for students and found that desks in a circle formation led to more on task behavior for students. Students who had a tendency to not engage in academic conversations were more likely to participate when desks were not lined up in rows. Individual tasks were better completed when the desks were in rows. Collaboration and having all students learn together is much more effective when students can see each other and share documents.

The years I spent working in resource, monitoring the lunch room and helping in the classrooms began to give me perspective on the fact that not all students show up to school equal. As students walk in the door, we would like to think that they all have the same opportunities and that is what schools want to provide. However, every student can be a unique case. The schools, especially that I was working in, had diverse learners from many backgrounds. In
order to be able to teach to each of these students equally, there needs to be differentiation and equity. These concepts were very new to me and quite overwhelming. Teachers and staff need to have the tools to identify what students need and then differentiate for those needs. This is much easier said than done. My eyes were opened to the fact that we could provide students with different opportunities to learn and while the outcome can be similar, the road to get there may be different.

Seven years ago, I started substitute teaching and I began to learn even more about the classroom. I learned that students need breaks, some students need headphones, some need to go to another room to test. I began to understand the goal was not so much to pass or to fail, but to set students up for success. As teachers, we need to give our students the tools so that they can learn, grow and succeed.

I had decided that I did not want to substitute teach in any special education classroom or English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. While I felt that I had learned quite a bit about students in schools over the years, I was afraid of the challenges that might arise if I were in a non-mainstream classroom. I was approached by the principal of the main school where I substitute taught and was asked if I would consider subbing for an ESL teacher who was going to be out for months. I told her that I was afraid that I was not meant to be in this type of classroom. The staff encouraged me to come in and meet with the ESL teachers and I did. I convinced myself that I could handle the job and was there for 5 months. To my surprise, I found where I belonged in the schools. I loved the idea of advocating for students and finding ways for them to learn in the mainstream classroom. I have grown as a person as I have learned how to teach to all students in the classroom. It has allowed me perspective on issues such as equity and diversi-
ty. It was such a great experience that I enrolled in the MAT EL licensure program at Hamline University.

Hamline University Through my coursework and teacher training, I have been exposed to even more in the field of education. In particular, the J-term course that I took on exceptionality really gave me insight into how much more there is to teaching students and how all students need an advocate in the classroom. It may just be one teacher for many, but as teachers we need to know and understand our students so that we can provide an environment for them to grow and succeed in. It was in this course that I began to wonder how I could possibly determine if a student who did not speak English as their native language had a learning disability. Even armed with my knowledge of second language acquisition, how would I determine if the barrier in reading or speaking came from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) or a Learning Disability (LD)? If I could not determine that as a specialist, how would a mainstream teacher know how to advocate for a student like this?

Many times, teachers and parents feel that if a student is in EL only or Special Education (SPED) only it is okay because at least they are getting some help. As an EL teacher, I believe that finding the correct cause for a delay is so important so that we can continue to advance these students. I began to think about this issue so much that it terrified me to think I may not have the tools to correctly identify my students. This was compounded with the fact that I was told it is very difficult in some districts to get students a SPED referral if they are in EL and many times parent’s may not agree to further testing.
So as I began my journey to identify a capstone project and research question, the first thing that came to my mind is how can I help others as well as myself identify the differences between a learning disability or language barrier due to second language acquisition.

**My Professional Background**

I knew that I did not want to be a mainstream teacher, but more of a specialist. While I am a relatively organized person, I like the idea of working with a smaller group of students and helping them to learn the material in ways to succeed alongside their peers. Knowing that I can be a voice for students and advocate for them is also something that is very important to me. My journey to this place in my career and life has given me a better understanding of what students need and how I can give them the tools to learn and live to their full potential.

**Rationale**

I have had an interest in this area since I took exceptionality in my teachers training course here at Hamline a few years ago. One of my fears as I begin working with ELLs is how will I know if they have a problem related to a learning disability. I had gained knowledge in my second language acquisition class that I took, but there is still a lot that has to be looked at when making that determination. Often, students may be referred too late to SPED or too soon. I have taken an initial look at the research out there and I am hoping to come up with a project that can help other teachers both EL and mainstream classroom teachers make the best choices for our students.

Many times a teacher makes a judgement on where a student should be placed without using specific test measures. There are many inconsistencies in how a teacher identifies a partic-
ular student’s difficulty with reading and speaking. A study by Limbos and Geva (2001) found that teachers are not as likely to identify ELLs with LD as they might their Language 1 (L1) counterparts. A teacher that does not have the training in ESL is going to have a much more difficult time determining a second language acquisition barrier from a learning disability. We live in a world where we are holding professional developments and working with teachers to continue education so that we can use best practices with our students. However, we need to have a unified type of assessment set up that allows all teachers to be on the same page and to be able to make determination about a student's education in a uniformed manner across all schools, districts and states.

If we are simply relying on the expertise and opinion of each teacher, the decisions being made are simply left up to individual opinions based on each teacher's experience and knowledge rather than on a uniform test that would allow educators to make decisions based on facts and expertise information on second language acquisition and learning disabilities.

**English Language Learners and Special Education**

The question of how to identify ELLs with a LD has been an ongoing one. In order to best advocate for our students, we need to know what tools we have and can use to give them the chance to succeed. The problem seems to be identifying the learning disability from second language acquisition. How do we know what is the best test to use? Many times, mainstream teachers in the lower elementary years assume that difficulty with learning comes from a student’s difficulty with L1 if they are already receiving those services or have been considered for those services. These students are simply overlooked for learning disabilities.
Another concern that is raised is the timeline in which ELLs are identified with learning disabilities. Often, struggling readers are not identified until upper elementary years. Reading instruction begins in the early elementary years so the concern is that students, especially those in with ESL services are not identified until after crucial learning instruction has taken place. It is important for teachers to know how to identify when a student needs to be referred for assessment for EL or SPED. Additionally, teachers need to understand the assessments that take place and how to interrupt results. In a study by Samson & Lesaux (2009), information was presented that showed rates and predictors of identification for services. It was found that that identification of ELLs for special education services was most likely to occur in upper elementary years. Often, students in the lower elementary year such as K-2 were not identified for services. The studies showed that the greatest predictor of student identification was based on teacher ratings rather than on reading proficiency. A question that comes to my mind is how does a teacher come up with this rating and is there a test in place that can identify a learning disability from a second language acquisition barrier? This same study by Samson & Lesaux (2009) demonstrated that the chances for an ELL to be placed in special education in K-2 grade was less likely than a L1 student. However, the chances went up after the student entered third grade.

The response-to-intervention model (RTI) is a way for educators to secure an accurate assessment of students who have difficulty with the instruction and it allows them to correctly consider students for special education services. Samson & Lesaux (2009) point out that it allows all students who have the need for early intervention to receive the referral through more accurate identification. The biggest challenge may be in ensuring that early elementary teachers, grades K-2, have the training to identify ELLs with special education needs. Often these teach-
ers do not have the necessary training in ESL just as I feel I do not have the appropriate training in special education to make these high stake decisions. This is where the need arises for training and appropriate assessments for teachers to have to aid them in these important considerations that will affect these students in their educational journey.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In Chapter one I introduced my research question and why I think it is important. I talked about background and rationale for this study. Furthermore, I spoke of my experience in a title one, urban school district. I illustrated my journey to the teaching career that I am beginning and what I hope to accomplish in working on my capstone project. Chapter two will present a literature review of the research that I have found on how educators can determine when a student is struggling in reading due to difficulties with the English language or due to a learning disability or perhaps both. Chapter three is an overview of my project which is a professional development for staff to learn how to identify when a student needs to be placed with EL services or special education. I will present a tool to use to aid in that identification. In Chapter four I reflect on the process of creating a professional development and what I think may be useful in future professional developments.

My career as an ESL teacher is just beginning. I have years of experience working in schools and being in schools, but I have not been a licensed teacher for very long. I do believe the experience that I bring into the teaching world is varied and important and gives me a perspective different and unique from that of my colleagues. This capstone is an opportunity for me to not only learn about the types of students I may encounter, but will give me tools to better
teach and advocate for those students. I have learned that often times students are over or under identified for services and my hope is to add insight on *How to Distinguish a Learning Disability Versus a Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition?*
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will review literature as well as policies that surround special education and second language acquisition for English language learners to determine: *How to distinguish between a learning disability versus a barrier due to second language acquisition?* This is a topic that requires more research and tools to allow all students the chance to thrive with adequate support from their schools. This chapter will begin by talking about the laws that are in place so that there is equity in education without biases. It is important to note that there are still biases even with the laws that have been passed, identifying those biases and how students are or are not referred to special education or English Language Learning (EL) is important to understand. Those biases can revolve around sociological factors as well.

Second language acquisition is a topic that should be understood by all educators; reviewing literature that explains what second language acquisition is and how it can be misinterpreted for a learning disability is essential to this understanding. Furthermore, knowing what supports can aid English language learners as they are assessed for learning disabilities as well as for supporting them in the classroom is another topic that I will review in the literature. This will lead into the accuracy of testing.

This section of the paper will delve into the literature that looks at how we determine an English language learner’s needs. How can educators best advocate for their students to ensure that they are receiving the appropriate education that not only offers support, but challenges them to meet and reach beyond standards and expectations.
Definitions

Thoughtful comprehension of the terms and the legislation that is behind them is one part of understanding how to advocate for students. Furthermore, it may ensure that every student has a chance at an equitable education.

Special Education Special education (SPED) is defined by the United States Department of Education in accordance with The Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) as “a specifically designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability that is conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions and other settings.” A specific learning disability (SLD) is described by Vaughn, S., Bos, C.S., Schum, J.S. (2007), as “a deficit that is primarily a result of: Visual, hearing, or motor disability, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage, lack of appropriate instruction in reading.” Alternatively, a Learning Disability (LD) refers to “a unique group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing and reasoning or mathematical abilities” (Vaughn, et.al. 2007, p. 67). Setting students up for success and being advocates for them means that teachers need to understand and respect the individual needs of students with disabilities who are also ELLs. In order for this to happen, all teachers need to understand the differences between learning disabilities and second language acquisition.

English Language Learner English Language Learners (ELLs) have been a challenge for identification in the special education system. Aron. & Loprest (2012) point to the fact that identifying ELLs with disabilities is an evolving process that requires attention to misinterpretations and misrepresentations. Additionally, one could be identified with a disability that does not
match what is truly going on. According to the Minnesota Department of Education Fall Report (2018), “in the 2017-2018 school year, 862,160 K-12 students were enrolled in Minnesota public schools with 73,128 students, or 8.5 percent identified as English learners” (p. 13). The rate of ELLs is rising quicker than that of overall enrollment. While special education teachers are trained to deal with diverse learners, making sure that they are able to understand the ELLs and how to differentiate between a learning disability and a second language acquisition barrier is crucial to proper placement in these programs.

According to Sanchez (2017), “ELLs are often concentrated in low-performing schools with untrained or poorly trained teachers” (p. 9). Having trained staff and teachers to work with the growing number of ELLs in all states is becoming an issue. When looking at national data, only 63 percent of ELLs graduate from high school as compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent (Sanchez, 2017). Being able to intervene early with services at school allows students to be able to transition to the next steps in their postsecondary education and move on to job training, careers and lives as independent adults who contribute to society. Many of the programs offered include family services that allow for all members of the families to be involved in their students’ well-being and future endeavors. While these programs are costly and growing, they are important to help bridge the gap in educational outcomes for all students (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

In accordance with IDEA, a Transition Plan must be included in a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Before a student turns 16, the IEP must give a Transition Plan or note that a Transition Plan is not needed for services for the student when they graduate or leave school. This plan is put into place to help not only the student, but their family as they take the
next step in their life whether that is postsecondary education or job training (Birnbaum, 2008). In order for these steps to take place, proper legislation must be put into place and educators need to have an understanding of how to implement resources and how to reach beyond what is available to them.

**Legislation** An important turning point in history came when recipients of federal funds could no longer discriminate against people with disabilities. The passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Section 504 excluded the segregation of students with disabilities as laws were set into place to allow all students equal education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was passed in 1975 and it allowed students in public schools the rights to receive services to accommodate their disabilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012).

Legislation encouraging rights for bilinguals and English Language Learners (ELLs) appeared in the 1960s. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act forbade language-based discrimination. Following that, in 1968, the Bilingual Education Act: Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act promoted bilingual programs in schools. During 1975, the United States Department of Education developed guidelines that specified approaches, methods and procedures for educating students with limited proficiency in English.

The creation of Proposition 227 in California, during 1998, had intentions to raise the English proficiency of ELLs. While Proposition 227 raised the test scores of ELLs initially, it did not improve overall academic success of ELLs. Bilingual programs across the state of California declined and parents had to sign waivers for their students to participate in these bilingual programs. In 2016, the passage of Proposition 58 reinstated bilingual education in California and opened the door to new ways of thinking about culture and language diversity. Muniz (2017)
pointed out that many of the Californians that had voted for Proposition 227 also voted for Proposition 58 suggesting that the passage of Proposition 58 may not have been “a wide-scale reaffirmation of multicultural and multilingual values” (Paragraph 11). Simply put, these propositions in California gave way to allowing students to be able to embrace their native language and cultures.

In 2001, the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed, making sure that schools were held accountable for the progress of all students. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB. ESSA, still in use today, gives more flexibility for setting goals and more personalized teaching plans for students. It requires parent involvement and approval to assist in planning on both the district and state levels. Both of these laws were put into place to assure that schools were being responsible in ensuring that all students received equitable education opportunities. While ESSA is still fairly new and its impacts may not be fully known, it allows states to have a bigger role in how they hold schools accountable for the progress of all students.

Legislation plays an important part in education and understanding area’s laws will help educators and parents advocate for students in all areas of education. Legislation along with the educators and educational institutions can provide fair and equitable education. The next section of this literature review will examine how biases and sociocultural factors may shape the educational experience.
Biases and Sociological Factors

Educators bring unconscious bias to the classroom as everyone is shaped by the different communities that they are raised in. Culture and experience also influence world views.

Assumptions There are many assumptions that society has about ELLs. It is important to understand that not all ELLs are homogeneous. ELLs come from various cultures, backgrounds, races and socioeconomic brackets. It is not uncommon for someone to think that people from other cultures are either wealthy and educated or poor and uneducated. While these factors play into a student’s background, they do not define who that person is or who they may become. Another consideration is that not all ELLs are immigrants. In 2012, the United States Department of Education reported that 57% of all ELLs were born in the United States (Gonzalez, 2016). Careful consideration needs to be paid to intellect. English proficiency is not an indication of intelligence. Often, assessments are given only in English and are not true indicators of a student’s true intelligence.

Additionally, ELLs while not fluent in English, may not be fluent in their native language either. If they are not using English in their homes they may need more scaffolding and differentiation as they are learning English. Sullivan (2011) found this to be true in a study in California. If a student has low proficiency in both L1 and L2 they had a much higher risk of being placed in special education. This was especially noted in districts with large levels of ELLs. Falk and Blumenreich (2005) point to systematic research where students are observed and information can be gathered to help support the development of students. This approach allows the teacher to think about the assumptions and stereotypes they may have regarding students and to reflect on how their teaching style connects with student interest and learning styles.
According to Sullivan (2011), the disproportionate representation of racial minorities in special education cannot be explained by just one factor, but there are some indicators such as free or reduced-price lunch and the median community income that have related to overrepresentation of certain minorities in some categories of education.

**Sociocultural Considerations** The misinterpretation of student behavior happens when cultures are not understood and teachers have limited training on cultural norms. There are many behaviors that teachers can mistake for defiance or withdrawing when, in fact, they may be linked to expectations in their native culture or due to second language acquisition. Quiet and shy behaviors are a normal stage in second language acquisition. Furthermore, some cultures raise their children to be non-verbal in certain situations and to not associate with people from other cultures. A child who displays these types of behaviors may be seen as not willing to participate and could easily be defined as having a learning disability if the correct assessments are not in place.

What appears to be defensive or aggressive behavior, or in some cases less concern about their academic outcomes are another part of cultural differences. It is not uncommon in certain cultures for children to learn to stand up for themselves and question authority. They may be taught that verbally expressing themselves and standing up for themselves is important which can appear as talking out of turn and harassing others. Other cultures teach their children that they are not in control of everything. This can come off as not caring when in fact they just believe there is nothing they can do. Additionally, students may talk back to teachers or appear disruptive in class as their culture allows for these types of interactions in the classroom or social situations (Hoover & Collier, 1985).
Academic patterns of ELLs as a whole correlate with social and economic characteristics that can be compared to native English language speakers. This can be looking at things like the schools that they attend, parents’ education level, marital status of parents and family income to name a few (Garcia, Arias, Murri & Serna, 2010). ELLs are at a much higher risk of not succeeding academically due to these factors. Many times, the schools that they attend may be located in areas where there are lower achieving student populations. Furthermore, the schools that ELLs attend may be linguistically isolated or they may have families that are linguistically isolated as well.

The next section will explore different types of research to help educators understand their students.

**Defining the Student** There are many ways to gather information on students in order to make accurate assessments of what students need to meet the standards. Spinelli (2007), recommends obtaining background information on students and how they communicate at home, in school, in social situations at school and in the community. Family members are an important part of helping teachers gather this information as they can further provide a link to the cultural characteristics of the child and their family by understanding what type and how much schooling the student has had, what language they speak in the home and other languages they may know, as well as, knowing how they have done academically and socially in school thus far. These factors give the educator a look into the students world and help to define the student so that they can meet the student where they are at.

Informal assessment, such as a portfolio assessment, is a means to gather samples of the students’ work which could be collected in both language 1 (L1) and language 2 (L2). The fam-
ily can contribute by adding lists of books that the family reads, favorite pictures the student has
drawn or homework samples they may have (Spinelli, 2007). Parents are able to gather this in-
formation and if they do not speak English well, it allows them a chance to showcase their stu-
dent. Authentic assessments can offer an unbiased approach to understanding a student, as an ed-
ucator can see what the child has done and is capable of doing as well as understanding teaching
methods that may or may not work for that student.

Limbos & Gevan (2001), found in their work that teacher assessments through direct con-
tact with the student complement formal testing for learning disability. They noted that teachers
often can make predictions on students’ academic achievement. The next section will look at
how there may be unconscious biases in teacher assessments and referrals.

Teacher Identities Some important sociocultural research speaks to teacher’s identities
and how that affects the way they teach and how they view students. The studies show that there
are two broad categories that identities lie within. The first one is race and power and the second
one is how identities are developed within teaching communities. Race and power center around
white privilege which affects the assumptions that teachers who are not of color may have. The
development of identities around teaching communities focuses on how teachers need to self re-
fect within their schools and communities to see how they may be influenced by their surround-
ings. Teachers that are aware of these influences can be advocates in their schools and communi-
ties as they work on knowing the social aspects and applying this to their teaching, practice and
advocacy (Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth, He, Levin, Rohr & Stein, 2010). The next section will
look at how biases affect the educational experience.
**Consequences of Biases** Biases overlap in teaching. Unconscious bias occurs when teachers are not using a clear lens to look at students which leads to decisions that may be inaccurate. Students that are routed to just special education or just EL are getting some additional assistance and support in school. However, Sullivan (2011), mentions that these students may be missing out on support and services that best meet their needs if not assessed and identified correctly. This can be a result of an educator labeling a student in one category and not both. If a student is placed only in EL, but has a learning disability they miss out on the support needed for that LD.

The educator assessing the student needs to have an understanding of second language acquisition and acculturation and assimilation. In acculturation, a student or groups of people hold onto parts of their native culture while adapting to the new culture. In assimilation, students or groups of people gradually adapt to the new culture and customs leaving much of their culture behind. Educators who understand acculturation may refer ELLs less often to special education. Along with an understanding of second language acquisition, teachers can better identify what is part of the process of adapting to a new culture while still being part of their native culture.

Second language acquisition and the supports that are offered to help ELLs meet standards will be discussed in the next part of the literature review. Schools do not always have enough certified staff to help with ELLs or special education. Mainstream teachers who have more training in the areas of ELLs, second language acquisition and special education can help to advocate for all students and to further help them meet the standards with the assistance of certified staff in order to start closing achievement gaps.
Second Language Acquisition and Barriers

This section will provide an overview of literature that helps with the understanding of second language acquisition and what barriers may arise without the knowledge of how ELLs develop English proficiency.

**Understanding Second Language Acquisition** Second language acquisition (SLA) is different from acquiring a first language and it can be confused with a LD. SLA is driven by a need or choice to acquire a new language. In the case of students in the United States school system it would be based on need. Students learning a second language may only be exposed to the second language (L2) at school and grammar tends to have a need to be explicitly taught. When learning a second language, ELLs can use their cognitive skills, but this could help or hinder the process (Sheenan, 2012). The stages that ELLs pass through as they develop L2 can resemble a learning disability. Common characteristics between an ELL and a student with a learning disability are mistakes in pronunciation, syntax and semantics. Pronunciation is omissions, substitutions and additions to language while syntax involves word order and mood and semantics are issues in metaphors, similes and figurative language.

Butterfield (2017) uses Krashen’s Stages of English Language Development to discuss the five stages of second language acquisition. Stage one is a silent period where students are just listening and taking language and culture in. This stage can last from ten hours to six months. Students should not be forced to speak, but should be provided with structure. Stage two is early production of language which may be one or two word phrases that allow them to obtain what they need and may last another six months. Students may answer with yes and no answers and questions that are asked should be simple who, where and what types of questions. Stage three is
speech emergence where students may try to put thoughts into sentences in the new language and
follow after about a year of the first two stages. At this point, questions asked can be expanded,
but students may still need English support in core subjects. There may be speech errors and stu-
dents may hesitate to speak in front of large groups or peers. Stage four is intermediate fluency
where students are adding the grammar of the new language. This stage occurs about a year after
speech emergence in stage three. There are few speech errors and speech appears understandable.
Stage five is advanced fluency which would sound native-like and proficient with no grammar
errors. This stage is typically not reached until approximately five to seven years after an EL has
started to work towards English proficiency (Sheenan, 2012). Learning a second language is a
conscious process where there are rules of grammar and vocabulary and acquiring the language
is more of a subconscious process where students can find a purpose for using the language
(Farnsworth, 2018).

Students are often considered proficient by teachers because they develop basic interper-
sonal communication skills (BICS) or social language. However, it can take five to seven years
for students to develop academic language, known as cognitive academic language proficiency
(CALP). Another important part of understanding SLA is looking at students’ emergent literacy
skills.

The following are the five pillars for obtaining emergent literacy skills: phonemic aware-
ness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The most important part of phonemic
awareness is knowing or understanding what sounds do not exist in a student’s native language.
The sounds that do exist will transfer to the second language. Considering phonics of a student’s
native language and second language (L2) helps in understanding what letters and sounds a stu-
dent will know. Some languages may be character based rather than alphabetical letters. This will make a difference in how well a student can learn L2. There are four types of pronunciation errors: omission, substitution, distortion, and addition. In omission the student may say “-at” instead of “cat”. Substitution occurs when a student replaces a letter such as “b” with “c” for the word cake. Distortion happens when the student mispronounces a letter and addition occurs when the student adds a sound to a word such as “buhlak horse” for “black horse”. Second language acquisition pronunciation development may mimic these articulation disorders that are associated with a LD (Case & Taylor, 2005).

Fluency is the ability of a student to read without making mistakes. It can indicate comprehension in some cases, but not all. Consequently, Case & Taylor (2005) found that syntax errors among ELLs and students with a LD were similar. Both ELLs and students with a LD have difficulty understanding negation and word order as well struggling with sentences that contain compound words, embedded clauses and modal auxiliaries. These types of common errors may affect fluency as well as comprehension.

Vocabulary is another area where skills in L1 can transfer to L2. However, student-friendly definitions are important when it comes to students’ understanding of L2. There are many cognates across languages, but false cognates exist as well. Additionally, idioms are a potential area of confusion in learning vocabulary.

Comprehension is multifaceted and is a skill that can transfer from L1 to L2. Building on prior knowledge before reading is important to comprehension and talking about what students are reading, as well as using visuals to understand material, is key to learning. Code switching
can be of value in comprehension as students can use L1 to negotiate meaning, confirm directions and check for understanding (Case & Taylor, 2005).

Transfer Theory according to Cummins (2000) suggests that “academic proficiency transfers across languages such that students who have developed literacy in their first language will tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in their second language” (as cited in Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2015, p. 32). Additionally, what students understand about literacy commonly transfers from L1 to L2. Among the most commons are as follows:

1. Knowledge

2. Literacy is symbolic

3. Literacy is communication

4. Phonological awareness

5. Alphabetic and orthographic awareness

6. Concepts about print

7. Habits and attitudes

8. Self-esteem

Case studies demonstrate that if a students’ academic prior knowledge shows that they are literate in L1, development of English language skills may be more easily promoted (Herrera, Perez & Escamilla, 2015). Bilingualism, moreover balanced bilingualism, can be correlated with greater mental flexibility as students have command of two languages or systems of communication (Crawford, 2008). Second language acquisition is multifaceted, which is why understanding of the process proves important to all educators as they make decisions and advocate for students.
**Barriers** Many factors influence SLA. These factors may include language proficiency, the student’s socio-cultural environment, motivation and attitudes towards L1 and L2, personality, perceived attitudes that others have towards first and second language and immigrants. Understanding the acculturation process can shed some light on a student’s behavior that may appear to be a LD (Case & Taylor, 2005). Inappropriate referrals to special education for ELLs happen when a student’s difficulties in the classroom are not linked to their English proficiency, stage of SLA, or if their home and school environments are not thoroughly examined. World views as well as expectations held by teachers can affect how students are viewed and where students are placed. ELLs behavior can mimic and may be misleading to teachers who have not had enough preparation in EL teaching or who do not have the means to assist ELLs in the classroom (Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Woodrich & Kasai, 2013).

Examination of the whole classroom situation including teaching style, curriculum and teachers’ expectations are important to making judgement of how an EL is performing in the classroom. Knowledge of the district, programs offered and demographics often are factors that influence where a student is placed. Special education testing often focuses on locating the problem with the student (Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalex & Reyes, 2011).

The study by Cheatham, et al., (2013) led to recommendations that teachers should be supplied with detailed information about their students in order to best advocate for them. This includes not only home language status information and English language proficiency, but factors about the student that help to interpret results and take the individual student into account. It was recommended that teachers would benefit from training for second language acquisition in order to help them in identifying a learning disability in ELLs. The study also recommended
having EL and bilingual specialists present at evaluations for ELLs being tested and referred for SPED.

Attention to the ability of special education and EL teachers is important to consider when students are being evaluated and placed for service. Relevant factors include not only the training and experience they have, but also the lack of training that teachers or teaching assistants may have in a particular setting. This deficit could be due to the lack of funds in a district or a teacher shortage, which leads to teaching assistants with good intentions, but lack of training (Zetlin et al., 2011). Additionally, placing students in special education programs who do not have special education needs may result in harmful outcomes such as low self-esteem and low teacher expectations (Cheatham et al., 2013). Having a matched diagnosis for a student allows proper curriculum and instruction. In order for this to happen there needs to be training for teachers on culture and second language acquisition as well as special education in order to promote and provide academic success (Zetlin, et al., 2011).

**Language Assessment and Testing**

Research shows that standardized tests produce reliable data and student ranking at national levels and can be easily scored, but there are restrictions on students. These tests may use pictures or terminology that ELLs are not familiar with and can affect whether or not a student is exited from ESL. Research shows that retrieving background information from families and previous educators can make a difference in assessing oral language development. Formal assessments have not been able to provide accurate information due to variations in culture and linguistics. A key to determining a LD from a barrier due to SLA is accurate language assessments (Farnsworth, 2018).
Concerns about Assessments Farnsworth (2018) points to issues in testing that have been prevalent for more than 40 years as follows:

1.) Tests written in or given orally in English with results that reflect English proficiency with little consideration given to cultural variations.

2.) Tests that use materials, terms and pictures that are not familiar to a student from a different culture.

3.) Lack of qualified personnel to assess, diagnose or understand ELLs or SPED students. Including a background in SLA or child language development.

Farnsworth (2018) recommends performance and dynamic assessments, portfolios, self-assessments and rubrics that offer choices and creative means for demonstrating knowledge of subject matters. Also recommended are Curriculum-Based Measurements (CBM), which teachers can create to frequently assess student learning and reflect on teaching practices.

Farnsworth’s study notes that students tend to perform differently in more formal contexts when they know they are being observed and thus observing students with peer groups can be a more accurate means of accessing language competence. Also noted is the development of pragmatics in peer groups when students need to use language to participate in social engagement. The use of these authentic assessments and observing students in multiple contexts can aid in determining ability versus lack of knowledge due to cultural and language differences. Notably important to this research is being able to identify settings that are naturalistic to ELLs where there is interaction with peers that can be recorded and transcribed to give a picture of the students oral language skills and help bridge academic discourse. Furthermore, the assessor needs to have an understanding of language, factors that affect acquisition and characteristics of LD and SL, as well as
an ability to recognize the benefits of peer observation and advocate for assessments that are fair and ethical.

Huang, Clarke, Milczarski & Raby (2011) raise similar concerns in their research into the assessment of ELLs. There is concern of assessments being in English only which leads one to realize that tests are not only about what students know; they are a language test as well. For instance, math assessments assess not only math, but reading and culture which can decrease accuracy. One may feel that a referral of an EL to special education will give the student extra support, but research has shown that an inappropriate placement can cause regression in progress as noted in a study by Garcia & Ortiz, 2004 (as cited in Huang et al., 2011, p. 734). Improper diagnosis or lack of proper assessment can lead to educational inequity.

Educational Implications Huang, et al., (2011) additionally found that the laws that specifically pertain to assessing ELLs with disabilities are basically non-existent and that laws developed for these unique needs of ELLs would be very beneficial for all involved. States are currently required to publish lists of modifications for ELLs and for special education, but not for those two groups combined. Also noted is “there is such a serious lack of research on learning disabilities occurring concomitantly with linguistic and cultural differences” (Ortiz, 1997, p. 330). Research also shows that there is a lack of training for teachers working with ELLs with learning disabilities and that educators would benefit from appropriate professional developments. Lastly, the research by Huang, et al., (2011) points to the effectiveness of curriculum-based dynamic assessment (CDA) similar to what Farnsworth (2018) talks about in her research. CDA or CBM show promise as they show what a student can do as they are being taught and not what they already know. It can be difficult to assess a student for what they have learned if the
tests are not set up for non-English speakers. Consequently, any test becomes a language test. In CBM or CDA, students are taught a new task and later demonstrate what they have learned. Huang, et al., (2011) believe that this could be used as a guide in developing more effective assessments to use with ELLs with learning disabilities.

**Evaluating Errors in Identifying Reading Disabilities** The importance of identifying ELLs who do have a LD is not to be disregarded. A study by Samson & Lesaux (2009) cited that ELLs who struggled with reading were more likely to be identified as having an LD in their upper elementary years. They report that ELLs from various backgrounds develop reading and phonological awareness in the early elementary years at the same rate as native English speakers and may experience similar difficulties as their peers. However, ELLs may be overlooked for SPED as educators may perceive this as lack of English proficiency. It was found that ELLs were underrepresented in SPED in kindergarten and first grade, in comparison to the upper elementary levels where students were overrepresented. Additionally noted was that educators may not be aware that students are eligible for both ESL and SPED services.

Limbos & Geva (2001) conducted research which noticed that educators found that difficulties in learning may arise from the linguistic and acculturation process leading to a delay of diagnosing ELLs with learning disabilities up to four or five years. It is argued that delaying assessment for ELLs can cause missed opportunity for remedial strategies.

The paradoxical situation is that ELLs are under-referred and overrepresented in special education due to assessments that do not meet the needs related to cultural and linguistic differences that ELLs face. Distinguishing between a disability and an emergent English learner can prove difficult for personnel that are not trained in the specialities of EL or SPED. The literature
in this review has shown that differentiating between what is a barrier due to second language acquisition versus a learning disability may require assessments that are tailored in ways that best show what students can do and what they have learned in comparison with their English language proficiency skills. Students need to have time to develop language proficiency, while educators make sure services for learning disabilities are not withheld. In both cases, students are at risk for regressing in their education (Sullivan, 2011).

**Supports** Nguyen (2012) points to successful research where students are able to support ELLs with a LD by using comprehensible input as introduced by Krashen. Comprehensible input uses gestures and body language such as facial expressions. A technique that has made this successful is Total Physical Response (TRP). In TRP, clearer pronunciation is used with longer pauses along with word walls, modeling, and simple high frequency vocabulary. It was shown that ELLs with a LD are more successful in welcoming environments with less students. However, when students are in mainstream classrooms, EL teachers can assist students with the use of graphic organizers, managing routines, binders, schedules and calendars and aiding in vocabulary with the use of gestures, summarizing and paraphrasing. Other supports include reviewing note taking and organizational skills, helping in co-taught classrooms to pace instruction, connecting to students’ prior knowledge, modeling and using scaffolding. Trained personnel in the classroom is essential to the success of ELLs meeting the standards and reaching beyond.

**Gaps in the Research**

The project that I have put together will provide educators with a tool to help them identify ELLs with suspected learning disabilities. Research has shown that often students are misiden-
tified as having a learning disability when the real issue may be related to second language acquisition. Lacking in this research is data from individual districts or states on the disproportionate numbers of English language learners (ELLs) misidentified with a learning disability. Having these numbers would benefit states and district as they look to improve upon assessments used for ELLs. There is a lot of research on the differences between second language acquisition and a learning disability, but having a tool that will work as a checklist for educators to use before submitting a referral for special education services is another missing piece. Through my research, I have worked on identifying what educators need to look at when observing the student and what types of environmental factors aid in this observation.

Summary

The question of my research How to Distinguish Between A Learning Disability Versus A Barrier Due To Second Language Acquisition? is one that many educators face and are not able to answer. My goal is to provide professional development over several short sessions with a useful, easy to use tool that teachers can consult when faced with this dilemma. The research has shown me that many educators who are not specialists in SPED or ESL do not have sufficient training when faced with students who present with what appears to be a learning disability. Educators are trained to advocate and do what is best for students while providing equitable classrooms that promote environments where students can grow and thrive. However, not all teaching programs can provide teacher training that covers all of the specialities. This is where I see a need for more professional developments where teachers can learn and be provided with tools to help the evolving classroom and students who fill them. I will work to provide a training that will
help educators understand the many levels of second language acquisition and similarities and
differences it has to learning disabilities.

Chapter three will review my project and how I plan to carry out the details of a multi-
day professional development. I will talk about the participants and what I hope for as far as re-
sults of the project.
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The review of the literature on second language acquisition and how it is considered when referring students for special education demonstrates that there is a need to provide a staff development on: How to Distinguish Between a Learning Disability Versus a Barrier to Second Language Acquisition? Additionally, combined with what educators know about the intersection of learning disabilities, especially reading disabilities, and the similarities to second language acquisition further leads me to this question. Driving my project is the students that face the different stages of language acquisition which are not only based on age, but time in the country, native language proficiency and motivation across all grade levels. A staff development designed for schools in the district seemed most appropriate for the many levels of staff that work with English Language Learners (ELLs).

This chapter helps teachers master an understanding of the basics of second language acquisition and show how varied assessments can provide a better understanding of the challenges that an EL is facing when learning language two (L2). Additionally, it provides information that builds on knowledge that teachers have already obtained in the areas of special education (SPED) and English as a second language (ESL) so that they can not only support all learners, but advocate for students to ensure that they are receiving an equitable education that allows them to not only meet the standards, but exceed them.
Project Design

The staff development for educators took place at a staff development spaced throughout the school year in a midwestern, tier one suburb of a large metropolitan area. Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner (2017) point out that effective professional developments have a sustained duration that allows educators time to learn, practice, implement and reflect on what they have learned. Additionally, staff developments that are ongoing allow teachers to support one another. Van Roeke (2011). Ideally, having teachers divided into grade level teams would be beneficial to their understanding of expectations and standards for those grade levels. Killion (2006), says that it is more likely for teachers to try strategies if they have seen them demonstrated in their colleagues classrooms. In my staff development plan, teachers participated prior to the school year during the teachers workshop week. This time is ideal as teachers are being introduced to new students and will have to make choices for students throughout the school year. Furthermore, I see this as more of a coaching model with in-classroom support to aid teachers in evaluating and assessing ELLs with suspected learning disabilities. Having a coaching model allows the staff development to take on a more individual style to fit the needs of a particular classroom. Additional instructors such as other EL or bilingual teachers can be a part of the process helping to adapt the learning to meet the needs of the students in their learning environment (Killion, 2006).

Setting

The school is a middle school (grades 6-8), in a midwestern, tier one suburb of a metropolitan area with 784 students. The population is 30% Asian, 27% white, 20% African American/black, 14% Hispanic/Latino and 8% other or two or more races. 12.5% are ELLs, 18.5% are
SPED, 64.7% free/reduced lunch and 1.8% are homeless. The choice of this school was based on where I was a substitute teacher. I had spent years working and raising my children in this first tier suburb. Over the years, conversations with teachers in the various schools, led me to my research question. Teachers that I worked with, at all levels, have struggled with this issue and I discovered that they generally had a lack of training in the area of English language learners (ELs) and learning disabilities (LD). This led my desire to aid in the recognition of second language acquisition (SLA) training for mainstream teachers to better understand our ELLs. Often staff developments in this district are done throughout the year and my plan was to be able to provide this to small groups of grade level teachers and other staff who work with ELLs. Van Roekel (2011), states that mainstream teachers typically have at least one ELL in their classroom, but that only 29.5% of mainstream teachers have the chance for professional developments that help them in learning about their ELLs. Additionally, only 20 states require teacher training programs to educate teacher candidates on ELLs (Van Roekel, 2011).

Beginning this training early in the year appears crucial to get a head start on evaluating students new to the school and district as well as students who have been overlooked or missed in past years. Van Roekel (2011), writes that 43% of new ELLs start in middle and high school. Following up with this group of teachers throughout the year to provide more training, guidance and tools is important to keep the project going and to be able to look at and assess results at the end of the year. Darling-Hammond et al., (2017), encourage feedback and reflection throughout the professional development so that teachers are able to think about and adapt teaching strategies as they gain insight on the topic. Limiting the staff development to small groups of grade level teachers so that I can closely work with them on the project will be beneficial to the coach-
ing and expert support that can focus on the teachers’ needs. I see this project as something that individual schools can do and can be led by an EL instructor, but as I began to plan this I see a district wide need for this training and would hope to be able to do this with the help of other EL teachers and implement it in several schools.

**Target Audience**

The staff development began with grade level content teachers at the middle school and special education teachers as well as the paraprofessionals who support these teachers. Review of the literature has shown that the evaluation and assessment of ELLs with suspected learning disabilities is best done in environments where a student is able to demonstrate their skills and what they are capable of doing without pressure. As pointed out by Farnsworth (2018), when a student can be observed in settings of peer interaction, the teacher can view the multiple ways that the student access their resources to navigate social and academic language. Having staff who are able to observe students with their peers trained on second language acquisition as well as language formation is essential to proper placement in programs that best suit the student and allow for growth academically and socially. Oftentimes, teachers are busy meeting the needs of several students in the classroom and the paraprofessionals in the classroom may be the observer. Furthermore, this training works on confronting the beliefs of the school community. It is important that all staff are trained to understand ELLs and to break down some of the beliefs that may unknowingly have. Killion (2006), shares that it is important to highlight the success of ELLs and to engage teachers and staff in discussion about the issues that immigrant families in the school community face. Having all staff that works in classrooms with students at this professional development allows barriers to be taken down to help aid in equitable education.
Method Implementation

The project consists of three staff development sessions. I used Constructivism World-view as my method of implementation. As Creswell (2014), states, social constructivists negotiate meaning socially. Meanings are formed through interactions and the cultural norms in individuals’ lives. The researchers job is to make sense of the world in which others live. It is the job of the researcher or teacher in this case to understand the meanings and norms that they have from their own cultural and personal experiences and interpret how others see the world. While going through this professional development and working with students, teachers need to be aware of what views and perceptions they bring with them when evaluating students. Furthermore, educators need to understand the view that students have of the world and what cultural and social norms they bring with them.

First Session

It was presented to all staff and is an introduction to second language acquisition, assimilation and acculturation through a slide presentation and videos. I had a short activity for teachers so that they can begin to step into the lens of an English Language Learner (ELL) and teachers would leave with an activity to complete before our next session. The activity for teachers involves talking about culture and what they know about culture. Next the teachers watched a video about acculturation and assimilation and teachers were asked to turn and talk about their experiences with this in or outside of the classroom. Through my experiences in the classroom, I have found that educators do not always understand what an ELL is experiencing as they adjust to their new culture. Additionally, if an ELL has been living in the country for several years, educators may not realize that the student still faces challenges regarding culture as they try to find a way to “fit in” to their surroundings. Especially in middle school settings where stu-
dents struggle socially. This is why I transitioned to the 1819 Civilization Act and the Carlisle Indian School that were a part of history that tried to get people to forget their cultures. I found these articles important to illustrated how the process of assimilation has been going on for years and was once forced upon people. Next, we moved into learning about first and second language acquisition and how English sounds to someone who’s native language is not English. I find that to best understand our students, we need to step into their life. This video and conversations around not being able to understand a conversation was important to give educators a chance to mimic what ELLs may hear when listening to instruction.

Teachers had new rosters of students and may not have all the information they need, but they began to brainstorm the need for a tool to help them gain a different perspective on ELLs and second language acquisition. What do they need, what do they want to learn? What do they know about ELLs with suspected learning disabilities? Teachers were asked to go back to their classrooms and reflect on the different ways their students use language. They were asked to pick one student, preferably an EL and record what they notice from that student and how they use language. I sent them a google form, *Understanding the Student*, that they can use to record observations.

Teachers were asked to sign up for the second session with the request that there is representation from each grade level with some variance in content areas. Groups could include a few teachers and a paraprofessional in groups that have one or two have ELLs with a suspected learning disability, but not necessary.

**Second Session** The second session started with reflection on the process of acculturation/assimilation and second language acquisition with another activity to involve teachers and to
continue the process of understanding our ELLs and how they acquire language. There was a slide presentation/video. Teachers read “Magic Carpet” and we did a discussion on hiding cultural identity. In my experience, I have found that students often try to hide traits from their culture, especially in the middle school years, in order to assimilate to their classmates. My hope was that this article would be something that teachers could use going back to their classrooms or in grade level teacher meetings. Next we looked at similarities and difference of second language acquisition and learning disabilities. We discussed the process of using portfolios to access ELLs suspected of having a learning disability. Observing students in social situations with peers as well as academic settings is important to see how a student uses and manipulates language. From my experience, I have noticed that standardized testing is not an equitable way for ELLs to be assessed amongst their peers. Tests do not consider language differences. Furthermore, information that can be provided by family members and former teachers as well as work samples are useful to access where the student is at.

The teachers had been sent a google document to record information on at least one student. We went over that document to talk about the types of things teachers noticed when observing a student from another culture.

The groups of teachers were then given a tool to use when observing suspected students in peer conversations in the classroom whether they are academic or social. The tool is a document where teachers record background information from family members and teachers regarding the student. Observations were then recorded on what teachers saw in the classroom as well as encounters with peers. These observations took place during turn and talks, group discussions or while working collaboratively on projects. I invited myself to come help with observation or
to help set up situations in the classroom for the teacher or paraprofessionals that would be ideal for these types of observations. One idea was to have lunch with a few of the students, the teacher and myself. There is another document that teachers can use to cross check what was observed with what is typical of ELLs or a student with a learning disability. Teachers could choose to do as many observations as they want. We would be looking for different types of speech such as social and academic language. What types of transitions do students make? How do they extend language? They will also be given a second tool to use when reviewing their observations that gives possible explanations for what they noticed.

**Third Session** This staff development included a discussion on how this tool worked and if it assisted them or they thought it would assist them in making referrals to special education. There was a whole group discussion on how the checklist for determining barriers to second language acquisition was useful or not useful. Reflection consisted of how they viewed ELLs and the difficulties they have with language. What were the misconceptions that they held about the progress students were making. What did they really know about the ELLs in their class? We would reflect on what they were able to observe in their classrooms. Taylor (2000) notes that providing feedback immediately to students and having participation and collaboration that is autonomous is beneficial to transformative learning. Additionally, taking time for critical reflection, problem solving and looking at all perspectives supports transformative learning where they can look at how they think about the world around them. Not all teachers may have had ideal situations for observations. I made sure that teachers felt confident in what they had learned and understood how to use the tool that they learned about in future observations. I offered follow up support and coaching for teachers as they learn to use the tools in their classroom going forward.
as they observe ELLs who are struggling. As pointed out by Knowles (1975), self-directed learning for adults is one way of learning. In self-directed learning, I can offer suggestions and solutions as well as evidence of how the process works. An evaluation form followed so that I could obtain proper feedback for future use of this project. I will be able to use this feedback from teachers on the process along with data collected by teachers over time to look at the effectiveness of my project. I will continue to check in with teachers who use this tool to see if they feel more comfortable in their referrals of ELLs to special education services. Additionally, I would check in with the Special Education Department to evaluate the number of referrals that they are getting for ELLs with suspected learning disabilities and if they received a copy of the checklist used by the teacher referring the student or if they had used the checklist themselves.

**Timeline for Completion**

This project began at the start of a new school year during teacher workshop week. I envisioned the staff development lasting most of the school year. It was planned for three sessions with time for observation and feedback. Depending on the timeline for the school and what days are set aside for staff development or when staff could meet, this project could end in early spring around the time of the start of the third trimester or start of a fourth quarter depending on the school. At sessions two and three, there are assessments of how the tools worked for the teachers. The assessments involved turn and talk and group feedback about how the tools worked. After the final session, participants will be given an evaluation to aid in future use of the professional development and tool.
Summary

My approach to the research question *How to Distinguish a Learning Disability Versus A Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition?* focused on offering educators at any level in K-12, a staff development where they are able to obtain knowledge on a topic that they may not have had as much training on. They will be able to use what they have learned in active participant observations with the assistance of the facilitator and the ability to reflect on findings in between sessions as well as at the completion of the staff development. In this chapter, I talked about the literature that led me to this project and how I would design the project. I discussed the setting and target audience for the staff development and how I would implement the project. Finally, I described the timeline for completion for this project. The following chapter will reflect on challenges and major learnings from my project.
CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

In this chapter, I will reflect on my experiences while completing my Capstone Project which aimed to answer my research question - *How to Distinguish Between a Learning Disability Versus a Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition?* I will discuss how the information in my literature review helped me create and design my project. In creating my project and tool, I realize that this is a stepping block and only the start of what can be done to aid educators in evaluating English Language Learners (ELLs) for learning disabilities (LD). I will also discuss the benefits and limitations of my project, along with future research opportunities.

In chapter one, I discussed my background and rationale for asking my research question and creating my project. Chapter two looked at the research regarding the over and under referral of ELLs for Special Education (SPED). Furthermore, I discussed the literature regarding the process of evaluating ELLs and what similarities second language acquisition (SLA) has to a learning disability (LD). Chapter three explains my project, the setting and audience it is intended for and how I would use a coaching model of working with educators to help model the tool that I created.

**Major Learnings**

My capstone project has allowed me the chance to gain a better understanding of second language acquisition and how it mirrors a learning disability (LD). Furthermore, I was able to examine the various ways that students are evaluated for a LD and what types of observations have proven to be more useful when evaluating ELLs suspected of having a LD. For instance, observing students within peer groups or social activities allows an educator to see how the stu-
dent uses language to get what they need. The student may not feel the pressure to “perform” or answer question a certain way when observed in peer settings such as recess or lunch. Additionally, using portfolios when you can to gather information on the whole student such as previous education, work samples, life events and cultural lifestyles allows for a better understanding of how the student learns and what types of interest they have.

As a new teacher I want to be able to advocate for my students. When I began my journey at Hamline to become a licensed teacher in English as a Second Language (ESL) I was not aware of the discrepancies in testing students for learning disabilities. Through my research, I was able to take a look at how it is difficult for educators to understand if a student has a true LD or is struggling to learn a new language. There are many reasons why a student may be struggling in the classroom and understanding the whole student is important. I began to focus my research on acculturation and assimilation along with second language acquisition as my background is in ESL and not special education. Talking with other educators in ESL, I discovered that my research question is one that many educators struggle with. While I knew it might be difficult to find the answer, I understood that I needed to research and look for ways to help educators understand ELLs in the classroom.

By focusing on who the ELLs are in our classrooms it allows teachers the insight to try to understand the struggles they may have. Rather than focusing on the disability or the struggle, educators can try to understand where the struggle comes from. My focus was to allow teachers to have a tool to help them decide if a student needs to be referred to special education as that process proves to be lengthy and often leads to results that are unrewarding for all involved.
This capstone project allowed me the opportunity to delve into this research question. I was able to get a better understanding of how an English language learner’s struggle may mimic a learning disability. It left me understanding how an educator may mistake second language acquisition barriers as a learning disability. I recognized that students often get misidentified and that classroom teachers can use assistance in finding ways to assist their ELLs, but don’t always have the right tools or that the system involves a lot of paperwork. I decided that by giving them a checklist they could monitor and watch progress of the student prior to making a referral that involves a large team and a lengthy process. My job as the ESL teacher would be to assist the classroom teacher in the observation to help model the tool as they become comfortable with it.

**Revisiting the Literature Review**

In order to try to answer my research question, I needed to look at research that discussed the over and under representation of ELLs in special education due to biases and lack of background in the English Language field. I found many researchers that covered this topic, but most notably were Farnsworth, Case & Taylor, Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva, Woodrich & Kasai and Sullivan. Research shows that inappropriate referrals to special education for ELLs happen when student’s difficulties in the classroom are not linked to their English proficiency, stages of second language acquisition, and their home and school environments (Cheatham, et al. 2013).

It has been recommended that classroom teachers benefit from training for second language acquisition to help them in the identification process of learning disabilities in their ELLs. Having ESL and bilingual specialists available to aid in the process is also beneficial to proper identification of ELLs as having a LD or not. Another consideration in the research is that dynamic assessments and portfolios be used as creative ways to assess students. These types of as-
sessments allow the student and the teacher the chance to have authentic communication and interactions that showcase their language skills unlike standardized testing where students may feel pressured to perform (Farnsworth, 2018). Looking at ability is important versus lack of knowledge due to cultural or language differences.

As I began to research and create a professional development for teachers I was excited to be able to share with teachers different ways to assess our ELLs. Knowing that we can observe students at recess, at lunch or in classroom situations with more play and social interaction to get a more complete picture of an ELLs ability as compared to what questions they cannot answer on a test gave me hope that we can find ways to be sure that we are not over and under referring students to special education who would benefit from further ESL services. My research question is one that many teachers would love a clear cut answer to and while I am not sure I could provide the answer, I have found useful resources and ideas that can start to help us move in the directions of a better understanding for all educators as we advocate for ELLs and all students.

**Benefits and Limitations**

By researching the differences and similarities between second language acquisition and learning disabilities I was able to understand the confusion that educators may have when deciding to refer a student to special education services. I was able to identify that one way to assist in this problem would be to develop a professional development where I could work on continuing education for teachers on the processes of acculturation, assimilation and second language acquisition. Furthermore, I felt that by giving them a tool that could simplify the process and aid in questions that they may have regarding the student and their progress could ease the referral
process and possibly save time. Lastly, I wanted to go into the classrooms and perform observations with teachers to not only insure the use of this tool, but to be able to give insight into how it works. My research on professional developments led me to understand that when teaching adults, it is important to give them things to do rather than just handing them information and worksheets that may not get put to use. Killion (2006) pointed out that if teachers see strategies demonstrated they are more likely to try them out on their own.

The professional development that I have created can be used across all grade levels in districts. The professional development is on-going and districts would need to find the time to allow educators to attend and follow through. The professional development is a series that would need to be attended each time by the original participants. This could be an issue if a district does not have the allowed time for the professional development or teachers are not able to make all sessions. Success is also dependent on the ESL teacher being able to help assist and aid in the observations. Educators have busy schedules and often the best laid plans take a turn. This project is a way to add to the bank of knowledge that educators already have, but I understand that the district needs to be able to find the time and resources to allow educators to attend. Furthermore, I understand that classroom teachers already do a lot of work outside of their classrooms, but the value of continued on-going education for our school staff is important for the best interest of our students.

My hope is that districts will be able to include this professional development in welcome week training and then allow for two shorter sessions throughout the school year. The availability of the ESL teacher to help in the observations is also valuable to the success of this project and tool. My hope is that districts will see the need and use for this project to help reduce over and
under referral of ELLs to special education programs. My project provides guidelines to start this professional development within an individual school, but I am hopeful that with the support of administration this project can be implemented district wide.

**Future Researcher**

In reviewing the research and creating this project, I realize that more research needs to be completed in regard to evaluating ELLs for special education services. While I found a lot of research, there is much room for more work in how to best evaluate and look at learning disabilities in ELLs. My best determination from the research I found points to authentic and dynamic assessments. This would be one area where more research could be completed and published. I think if researchers could study the different types of assessments and outcomes using dynamic versus standardized assessments to review the different outcomes and how this affects the referral process.

Another area to look at is the referral system verse the evaluation system. Evaluation systems need to meet state requirements. Norm-referenced assessments are generally used to determine if students qualify for special education and these types of assessments compare students to their peers. The research that I have done, shows that ELLs will have different struggles in the academic classroom so gathering more information from their interactions with peers and home life can help to best determine the direction we need to go with their referral process. Norm-referenced assessment rarely make accommodations for ELLs and do not look at their cultural and educational backgrounds or the process of second language acquisition. What needs to be considered is the reliability and validity of these assessments to determine if a student is struggling due to a barrier of second language acquisition or a learning disability.
More research that is needed would be in the area of the disproportionality of ELLs in special education in individual districts. By having this data, school districts would likely see the need for changes to the system. My project is designed to aid districts in curbing this disproportionality and I am hopeful that along with other research and design, it can help to make a difference in the over and under referral of ELLs to special education.

**Recommendations for Implementation**

My primary purpose of designing this professional development and tool is to help aid educators in the process of making referrals for ELLs with suspected learning disabilities. The design of this project is a way to further educate classroom teachers and staff on students individuality. ELLs like all students come to school with different backgrounds and experiences and finding the best way to teach our students is critical to their success in future academic and social situations. My hope is that this will help to develop and bridge gaps between classroom teachers and ESL professionals by providing support.

I am currently beginning my first teaching position and my plan will be to share my project with my new school with the hope of implementing the project in the next school year. As a new ESL teacher, I will have the support of other ESL teachers at my school as well as a district ESL coordinator. I will need their support and backing to present this project. My hope is that by sharing my research and project I will be able to help make improvements in the referral system. My ultimate hope is to ease the process. From talking with other educators in the district, I have realized that there is a need to make this process less of a burden to educators and more of a realization of aiding and advocating for our students.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reflected on the process of finding answers to my question, How to Distinguish Between a Learning Disability Versus a Barrier Due to Second Language Acquisition? I created a professional development and a tool in response to the research to help assist educators in this area. The tool allows educators to look not only at student progress, but at their background and how they are acquiring language. This chapter also looks at the benefits and limitations of my project and what recommendations I see for future researchers. I also talked about the limitation that schools or districts may have in implementing this project with the hope that future research would prompt them to see the need for this professional development and project.

The capstone project has allowed me to dig deeper into ESL education and the needs there are to advocate for our students. It gave me the opportunity to look closely at second language acquisition and how someone who is not fully trained in that area may see a student’s classroom struggles differently. It made me consider the need for schools and districts to take a closer look at the referral system and the number of students who are disproportionally placed incorrectly in services that they may not need or are not beneficial to them.

I have created a project that addresses these issues and takes steps toward improvements in this area of education. I hope that by sharing my work with future colleagues, I can play a role in helping to determine the correct services for ELLs so that they are given the best chance for success.
References


